

William Rusher

The Nixon Haters Have a Long Way to Go

Washington

THE GREAT INDOOR SPORT of America these days is, of course, Nixon-watching. And that is as it should be, for — like him or not — the man is a master of the political arts: He can “add colors to the chameleon, change shapes with Proteus for advantages, and set the murderous Machiavel to school.”



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But any sport, even a good one, can grow tiresome; and if you have become weary of watching Richard Nixon, try for a change watching the Nixon-haters.

This crowd, of course, has been around almost as long as Mr. Nixon: Certainly ever since 1948, when young Congressman Nixon played a large and honorable role in the chain of events that sent Alger Hiss to prison.

At least once it seemed that the Nixon-haters had triumphed for good — in 1962, when he lost his race for the governorship of California and held his famous “last press conference.”

He came back, as we all know, but as this year of Watergate draws to a close, Mr. Nixon is on the ropes again, and the Nixon-haters have drawn blood. It is tempting to declare that it's only a matter of time, that Mr. Nixon is truly down and out at last. And so, indeed, it may prove. Surely there must be a limit somewhere to the number of disasters (many, to be sure, of his own making) than can fall on the man without crumpling him.

But, amid the general agreement that Mr. Nixon is through, I rise to make one small point. They haven't got him yet.

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FIRST, YOU WILL RECALL, the Nixon-haters were convinced that Watergate was going to spell his doom. Not only “White House employees” but Mr. Nixon's closest friends and advisers — Mitchell, Haldeman and Ehrlichman — were implicated in that messy business, and before Judge Sirica and Senator Ervin were through most of them were on their way to prison. But not Nixon: His line bent, but it held; no single aspect of the Watergate operation was traced to him personally.

Then it was learned that Mr. Nixon — to his subsequent undying regret, one may be sure — had secretly taped many of his official conversations and phone calls, and the cry went up: Produce the tapes. Mr. Nixon resisted so strenuously that he almost seemed to graze impeachment; but at last he yielded, and only the fact that a couple of conversations hadn't been taped after all, and that there was a missing 18-minute hiatus on one that had been, saved the famous tapes from the national amnesia that has washed over Sam Ervin and his wondrous committee.

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INDEED, THE CASE for impeaching Mr. Nixon (and the Nixon-haters, by the end of October, were after nothing less) began to seem so obviously threadbare that for a time their emphasis tentatively shifted to a demand for his voluntary resignation.

But that washed out on the next ebb tide, and has been replaced by fresh calls for his impeachment — with, however, one important difference.

By “impeachment,” the Nixon-haters will now tell you, they mean only impeachment, not removal. They draw a sharp distinction between the role of the House of Representatives, which must constitutionally “impeach” — i.e., bring charges — against the President, and the Senate, which must then try the charges.

Their whole effort is to focus public attention on the desirability of the House impeaching Mr. Nixon, and to postpone if possible any consideration of whether he ought in fact to be removed. Impeachment, the Nixon-haters purr, is merely a way to investigate Nixon's conduct in an orderly fashion — scarcely worse than a bad cold, you might say.

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AND CERTAINLY, they murmur, there is plenty to investigate — always cursing those loose, imprecise but evil-sounding phrases that say so little and imply so much: “the wheat deal,” “the milk deal,” the ITT deal,” “the San Clemente expenditures,” “the Rebozo hundred grand,” “the President's tax returns,” and so on.

Somewhere in that ton of gas, they imply, there must surely be a pound of solid matter.

Well, maybe. But the Nixon-haters will have to find it before — not after — they impeach him.

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