



Impeachment-- A Risky Business

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YOU MURDER one President. You harass a second until he lays down his office. You submit to a third President being destroyed politically, not long after he's won reelection by a huge majority. And after that, you have a new kind of political system."

This is the argument against President Nixon's resignation that is being energetically used by the leaders of his beleaguered White House. It is an argument that deserves extremely careful consideration, especially nowadays, when the House is plainly going to have to vote on the President's impeachment.

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THE TRUTH is that in the last decades, good intentions have all too often produced godawful by-products. No measure in many decades, for instance, has been more morally essential than school desegregation. Yet ill-prepared school desegregation has tended everywhere across this country to produce segregated center cities. And near-ghetto big cities represent no gain for anyone.

You can think of all too many other cases of reforms that have backfired in one way or another. This most emphatically does not mean that most reforms are undesirable. But it does mean you have to consider the risks involved in impeaching a President.

The risks are immense. The mere process of impeachment, deeply embittering and bound to take a fearful amount of time, is an immense short term risk in itself. As the Yom Kippur War ought to have reminded us, this is not a peaceful, danger-free world. With dangers every-

where the U.S. government cannot safely be paralyzed for a couple of years on end. Yet paralysis-for-the-duration is the minimum price of impeachment.

The powerful chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee, Representative Wilbur Mills of Arkansas, recently made considerable stir by publicly calling for the President's resignation. None the less, Mills is still saying privately that he means to vote against impeachment, "because it's a damned dangerous business, and because no high crime has been proved against the President."

You find the same pattern in the most recent Gallup Poll. If the pollsters can be trusted, the country is now evenly divided between those who hope for the President's resignation and those who do not. Yet those who want the President impeached are not much more than a third of the electorate, with a clear majority against, too.

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AT PRESENT, it still seems highly doubtful that the House of Representatives will even produce the necessary bare majority for a bill of impeachment. Every member is fearful of the vote. Every member knows he will make unforgiving enemies, whichever way he votes. But rather more believe that rather more enemies are to be made by a proimpeachment vote.

The only trouble is that this is the present situation. If most weeks continue to bring news deeply damaging to President Nixon, the present situation will surely change for the worse from the President's standpoint.