

The Impeachment Debate

"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 also an argument that he has used himself. Furthermore, 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.

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. In truth, President Johnson's great Voting Rights Act, that has transformed the politics of the South, is just about the only recent reform that has been all gain, without any kind of discernible loss. This most emphatically does not mean that most reforms are undesirable. But it does mean that costs need to be carefully, realistically counted in advance.

So it is quite true that you cannot stop at saying what the rather well organized impeachment lobbyists are saying, that "we can't have a man in the White House" who has done all the things the President is charged with having done. You have to consider the risks involved in impeaching a President. Nor should you underestimate those risks.

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 everywhere 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.

As to the long term risks of impeachment, they are of just the sort described in the White House argument against resignation. Plainly, moreover, these long term risks will be much, much greater in the case of impeachment, than in the case of resignation. All this is worth some thought, finally, simply because it explains opinions that are widely held and politically important.

For instance, the powerful chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee, Wilbur Mills of Arkansas, recently made considerable stir by publicly calling for the President's resignation. Nonetheless, Chairman 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.

You can be sure that as of today, the viewpoint of the House of Representatives as a whole does not differ by very much from the views of Chairman Mills and the majority-respondents of the Gallup poll. Whatever the final verdict of the House Judiciary Committee—unless it is also against impeachment—it will not affect the House greatly.

The committee, in fact, has been used as a kind of dumping ground for leftwing Democrats of the more far-out type. Everyone in the House knows this. Everyone in the House therefore discounts the committee's opinion in

advance. The pollsters and Chairman Mills matter a lot more.

At present, in consequence, 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 pro-impeachment 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.