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The Risks of Impeachment

Is it possible to measure the risks of the impeachment process that has now begun? The answer is "yes and no." Only history can judge the deformation of the American political system by what has happened already, and what may happen in the future. But the American political system is not the only stake on the table.

Suppose, more particularly, that the House finally votes a bill of impeachment. In that event, the question of the President's future will be before the U.S. Senate for about two months, according to the horseback estimate of Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield. The Senate also has a limitless talent for tying itself in knots, so the time required may be much longer.

This means, in turn, that the present semi-paralysis of the U.S. government will be transformed into near-total paralysis for a considerable period. Here, it is only necessary to think of the ugly response of the President's enemies, last October, when he took bold action to prevent direct Soviet intervention in the Yom Kippur war.

The false outcry, then, was that President Nixon was trying to "distract attention" from the Watergate mess. Only imagine the President's impeachment before the Senate, however. Imagine further that there is another enormous, dangerous challenge the U.S. has to meet somewhere around the globe. The situation of last October would be multiplied by 10 or 20, or 100, with the President's fate already in the hands of the Senate. And he would be almost powerless to do what needed doing.

To see what this may mean, it is well to begin with the simplest rule of post-Second World War history. The rule, which cannot be too often repeated, is that whenever the U.S. looks weak, the Soviets get tough.

Then think how weak we may look this summer. We are not too comfortably situated now. We have neglected our defenses so gravely, for so long, that the Soviets now enjoy a previously unprecedented lead in both conventional and strategic arms. The Western alliance is also in an unprecedented state of disarray. But with the Senate arguing about the President's impeachment, we shall then add an unprecedented national crisis of authority and leadership.

The U.S. will not merely look weak, in fact. The U.S. will then resemble a huge beached whale, powerless to resist whatever comes against it. There are signs, moreover, that the Soviets are already, at a minimum, playing with the idea of the kind of tough action that is their automatic response to American weakness.

Here, to be sure, one must recall the wonderfully instructive episode of George F. Kennan's prophetic insight before the Korean war. In the inner circle of policy makers, Kennan sent around a paper saying he had a feeling that Soviets were going to attack somewhere with a satellite army, and asking where this might happen. The reply to Kennan was, in effect, "anywhere at all, except Korea."

Yet the fact remains that there are rather important new storm signals in the unending conflict between China and the Soviet Union. Solid information has come in from both Warsaw and Bucharest that the Soviets are at

last beginning to organize a great spring meeting of Communist Party leaders.

It is thought likely that one item of Leonid Brezhnev's agenda in Havana was to secure Fidel Castro's full support at such a meeting. The Soviet aim at the meeting—if it comes off—will be to send China into outer darkness, as a renegade from the Communist bloc. And all the analysts have always argued that a Soviet attack on China would necessarily be preceded by just this kind of action.

There are other storm signals, too, such as the mounting viciousness of the Sino-Soviet polemic, and the brutal Chinese expulsion of a series of Soviet diplomats accused of espionage. Furthermore this summer is probably the time when the Soviet general staff will have to tell the Politburo, "If you want

to attack China, it's now or never"—because of China's nuclear progress.

If the President's impeachment goes to the Senate, in truth, we must expect a remarkable convergence. On the one hand, there will be the now-or-never point for the Soviets, mentioned just above. On the other hand, there will be American importance to act, especially concerning such a hideously difficult problem as a threatened Soviet preventive attack on the Chinese.

So there you have it. For all we know, the leaders of the Kremlin may have decided already to forget their old rule of getting tough whenever the U.S. looks weak. But anyone who says that attempting to impeach the President of the U.S. is not a risky business, may also look a great fool in the light of later experience.

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