

Compromise Comes Easy To Rodino

By Mary McGrory
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If they were in the prize ring together, the referee would stop the fight.

On the face of it, Richard Nixon versus Peter Rodino — the tough, embattled President against the humble chairman of the House Judiciary Committee — is the mismatch of the century.

Compared to other House chairmen, Rodino is a Casper Milquetoast, Italian style. Consider the late Carl Vinson, who imposed total silence on freshmen members during their first two years of service on "his" Armed Services Committee.

Rodino not only lets junior members speak at length. He suffers criticism from his colleagues in open session. When a member begins to orate, Rodino's mild reproof is, "we really shouldn't make speeches."

When it became clear that Rodino was history's choice to take charge of the country's gravest question — should Richard Nixon be impeached — the members scoffed or despaired, according to their answers. Most of Rodino's House career was passed in the shadow of the redoubtable Emanuel Celler.

Could a New Jersey politician who writes poetry, loves opera and hates confrontation hold steady under fierce White House counter-fire?

Like Richard Nixon, Rodino grew up poor in hard times. His childhood, however, was happy. His mother died, but his loving Italian immigrant father brought

up his children to "act with honor" and to "be 'eppy." While the other kids in the tenement played ball, Peter was versifying. When war came he was the first in his neighborhood to enlist. He served in Italy, won decorations.

Like Judge John J. Sirica, another Italo-American faithful to the President's affairs, Rodino is a night school law graduate.

At 5-foot-6, with aquiline profile, bright dark eyes, Rodino looks like a little Roman general. But his style is that of a symphony conductor coaxing harmonies, not that of the field commander smashing forward.

"So far it has worked," says Rodino of his cautious, unconventional approach.

Republican heckling, led by the President and currently escalating, does not bother him; he expected it.



Emanuel Celler and Carl Vinson

The first test of his soft-line leadership is now in the making. The President has asked that his able and combative counsel, James D. St. Clair, be present at the crea-

tion of any case against him.

The Republicans, persuaded that inclusion would be popular in the country, and alarmed, as one of them put it, that exclusion would be used by the President as "a club against us," are united in approval.

The chairman outlined the problem the other day

"The President has asked that . . . his counsel be present to do those things which are ordinarily done in the ordinary kind of lawsuit," he explained. "I do not agree. It is my opinion that this is not a common lawsuit. The President is not under charges. We are a grand jury conducting a grand inquest."

Rodino does not think the committee will fly apart on this procedural point. He is not rushing for a vote while the staff solicits an expert opinion.

He expects the Republicans to be won over to his

view that, if they admit the President's lawyer, they will in effect rewrite the Constitution and change the entire course of due process.

"I am not inflexible," said Rodino the other day as he sat in his office, which is decorated with mementos of his war service and the old country. "Compromise is always possible."

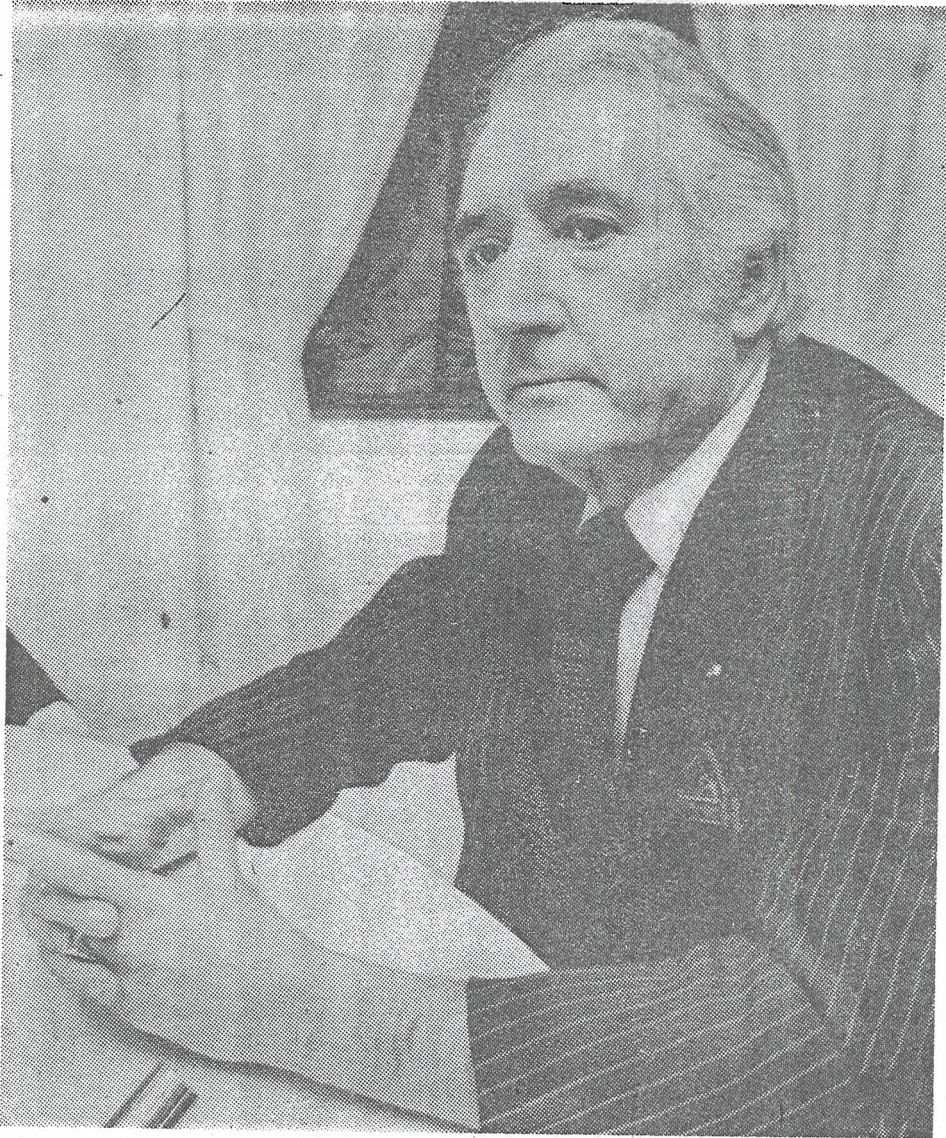
But when pressed as to the exact moment when the President's lawyer could take a role, he is vague.

"You will remember I said on the house floor that if the President asked to appear as a witness, we would grant his request. He could, of course, bring his counsel with him."

That may not appear like much of a compromise to the Republicans. But Rodino expects to prevail.

"I am armored in the Constitution," he says with a smile.

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AP Wirephotos

Judiciary's gentle chairman, Peter Rodino