

Nitpicking on the Impeachment Road



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WELL FOLKS, it's all over. The long drama that began with Watergate has come at last to its predestined end. It can only be a matter of time — probably a few weeks at most — before Richard Nixon resigns or is impeached and removed. One can almost hear the staff of the House Judiciary Committee breaking into the exultant cry: "We've got him! We've got him cold!"

For Eileen Shanahan, a reporter for the New York Times, has it from unnamed but reliable sources that Mr. Nixon (or his tax accountant) deducted \$244 from Nixon's gross income in the four years 1969-72 for California gasoline taxes, thereby saving the President \$78.51 in federal income taxes, or nearly \$19.63 a year. Since Mr. Nixon and his family rode in government cars during those years, and the cars were fueled with government gas (on which Mr. Nixon paid no tax), it seems possible that the deductions were "seriously inflated."

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HONESTLY, can you imagine grown people acting this way? I thought I had considered every conceivable outcome of the impeachment controversy, but I was wrong. It never occurred to me, until just now, that it may ultimately dissolve in a gigantic wave of national laughter.

When you come to think of it, that prospect isn't as far-out as it sounds. There is getting to be a distinct flavor of Keystone Cops about the whole vast impeachment effort.

The impeachment forces began by zeroing in on Watergate — but Mistah Sam never quite managed to tie Mr. Nixon to that.

They thought they had caught Mr. Nixon in flat disobedience of a court order to

produce certain tapes — but the blighter ruined everything by turning over the tapes.

They pounced on a tape with a hum and five erasures in it — only to have Judge John Sirica's own experts give an innocent explanation for the hum which also inadvertently explained every erasure save the first (which Rose Mary Woods had already admitted was her error).

They found somebody to testify that Howard Hughes sought a favorable ruling in an anti-trust matter in return for a \$50,000 campaign contribution, and proved that Hughes got the ruling — only to learn that the contribution had been returned.

They found somebody else to testify that Fife Symington was to get a fancier ambassadorship in return for a \$100,000 contribution, and proved, this time, that he actually made the contribution — only to discover he never got the ambassadorship.

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RECENTLY some members of the impeachment lobby have seemed to think the House Judiciary Committee might demand just about every document in the White House and nail Mr. Nixon for contempt if he refused to turn any of them over. But even Chairman Peter Rodino is leery of that maneuver, particularly since his hot-eyed staff hasn't even finished reading the documents they've already got.

Have I missed anything? Probably. Anyway, there's still Ms. Shanahan's discovery about the gasoline taxes. But the impeachment lobby may soon begin to lose, through such ludicrous nitpicking, whatever claim it has on the serious attention of the nation. It is all too obvious what they want — and how little they care about the way they get it.