

Why Impeachment Proceed

The climactic episodes of the Watergate debacle—the House debate on an impeachment bill, and any Senate trial—should be televised. This will help people understand—and accept—the outcome, whatever it is.

The last year has dramatized the advantages of television as against print media. President Nixon's speech of April 30, 1973, had to be *seen* not to be believed. The Senate Watergate hearings were run (as John F. Kennedy said of Washington itself) with Southern efficiency and Northern charm, but with the help of television they blew up the remnants of the cover-up and woke up the nation.

Only television could have given us the savory flavor of those hearings, and often the flavor was as important as the substance. It would have taken literary, not journalistic, skills to capture in print the distinctive tang of (say) John Ehrlichman lecturing Sen. Herman Talmadge about Mr. Nixon's potential right to order bank robberies.

And the print media cannot even handle all of the *printable* substance

of our scandals. A disturbing number of Americans suspect that Spiro T. Agnew was innocent of all wrongdoing, and was railroaded out of office for inscrutable political reasons. No one could believe that after reading the 40-page Justice Department summary of evidence against Agnew. But how many Americans read it? One in 50,000? How many newspapers published it? Five?

Only a very few newspapers have the capacity to carry the transcript of an impeachment trial. And the network news shows, from which most Americans get most of their information, could not give adequate coverage of the trial.

Subtract the denture adhesive commercials from the network shows and you are left with 22 minutes of news, a transcript of which would not fill half of the front page of the New York Times. Only live television coverage is large enough for the impeachment story. We should rejoice that today, unlike in 1867, we have the technology to give impeachment the coverage that the public interest requires.

Sen. James Buckley (Cons.-R.-N.Y.) is

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afraid live television would incite the Congress to irresponsibility and would turn the Senate into a "20th Century Roman Colosseum." Maybe. Maybe not.

If Buckley is right, then it is high time the nation had its nose rubbed in the fact that Mr. Nixon is not the only unruly politician in Washington. Indeed, the best reason for televising the "constitutional machinery" in action is to remind Americans that the machinery metaphor is indeed a metaphor.

That tiresome metaphor calls to mind the occasion when President William Howard Taft was being lectured by a young aide about an aspect of what the aide kept calling the "machinery of government." Finally the bemused Taft whispered to a friend, "You know, he really thinks it is machinery." Televised impeachment proceedings, unruly or not, would remind citizens that the government is not machinery. It is awash with *people* and other foul things. That is why government is a snake in the grass that needs a lot of watching.

Some worry warts insist it would be cruel and reckless to expose tender

children to the sight of Congress in action. Granted, there is something heart-rendingly sad about the possibility of a child suffering the double trauma of learning, perhaps in a single year, that there is no Santa Claus but there are reckless senators.

But life is real, life is earnest, and children are tougher than we think or they wouldn't survive exposure to normal daytime television. Anyway, any child whose bedtime is later than 7 p.m. recently could have seen television news film of Sen. Vance Hartke (D-Ind.) turning a Senate hearing on veterans' problems into a demagogic circus for the benefit of a mob of radical demonstrators.

Obviously senators don't need impeachment proceedings in order to become irresponsible. And the only way to hide the Hartkes from our children is to refuse to televise *anything* on Capitol Hill.

Anyway, it is conceivable that a critical audience of attentive children watching the senators' every move might pressure them into behaving themselves. That is what the boys at the serious quarterlies call peer group pressure.