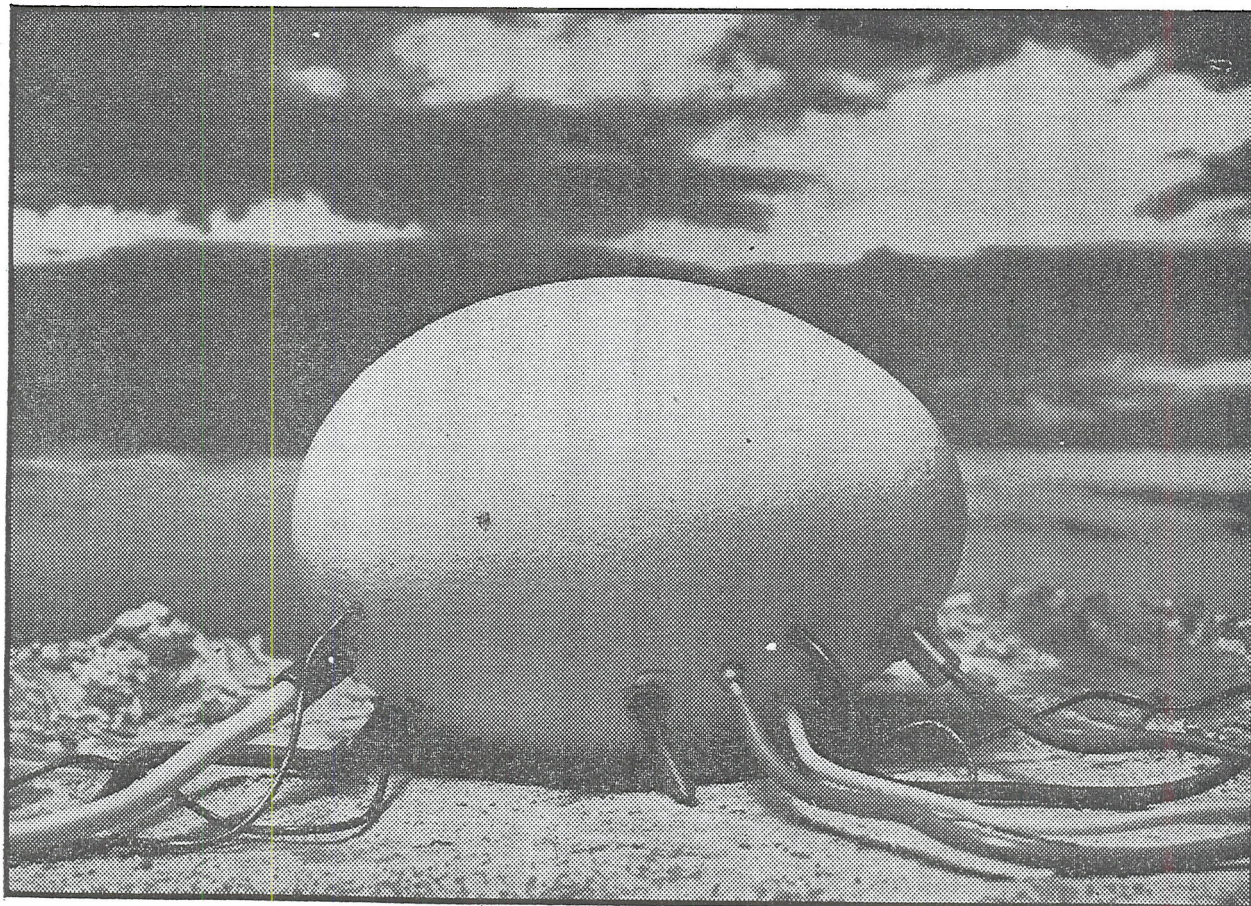


*An Argument for Full Radio and Television Coverage*

Murray Duitz

## Impeachment in the Living Room

By Walter Pincus

WASHINGTON—If the House Judiciary Committee votes an impeachment resolution, I hope both houses of Congress amend their rules that now prohibit live broadcasting of debates to permit full radio and television coverage of the floor proceedings.

Arguments against this view are already being made. Television cameras, it is said, would destroy the quasi-judicial nature of the House debate and, if it comes, the Senate trial. Individual members may be tempted to make demagogic speeches, or, at the minimum, television would preclude careful and precise discussions. Millions of phone calls, telegrams and letters, reflecting the ebb and flow of the debate, would swamp members. Because House procedures would be complicated and confusing, the public would not understand and, as a result, the public's opinion of Congress would drift even lower than it has.

Some of these fears are justified but important considerations weigh heavily on the side of bringing in microphones and cameras.

Many of us who have grown up on print news, both reading and writing it, do not like the fact that television has become the dominant news force in this country, but it has. Most Americans get their news first from television and find it more believable than what they see in newspapers and magazines. If television is barred from live coverage it still will provide two-thirds of the nation's adults with their basic information on the impeachment proceedings. How will it be presented to the nightly network news audience of 50 million people?

Without cameras on the floor, the news staffs will have to resort to artists drawing scenes from memory for the visual part of the coverage. The top network newsmen will be in the galleries making notes, but re-

porters' summaries cannot replace the actual voices and scenes.

Since balance has become a watchword of television news, chances are that an equal number of spokesmen—for and against President Nixon—would be interviewed individually outside the chamber each day irrespective of what happened on the floor. The opportunity for demagoguery and misstatement there would be greater than on the floor where both sides would be represented.

Further adding to the potential for imbalance would be the President's ability to command live television time on his own, to say what ever he wanted—or perhaps for coverage of an overseas trip designed to divert the public from impeachment.

Finally there is the question of television news time. Network programs are 30 minutes long. They can only highlight debate. Late-night specials, which the networks would probably undertake, could only provide summaries, and boring ones at that, if they had neither films nor tape of the actual events. A few newspapers would print transcripts of the debate but the number of readers would be minuscule compared to those who would watch live television.

Senator James L. Buckley exaggerated when he said that televising the impeachment would turn the Senate into a "twentieth-century Roman Colosseum as the performers are thrown to the electronic lions."

Nor is it likely that the President will sit "in the well of the Senate, like an accused criminal in the dock, with the Senate ablaze with lights," as James Reston has suggested. Chances are that, like Andrew Johnson a hundred years ago, Mr. Nixon would be represented on the floor by counsel and never appear personally.

The tensions will be enormous, the pressures on the President unbearable, the decisions to be made by Congressmen and Senators difficult. But television did not bring us to this point,

Mr. Nixon and his associates did.

To date, Senators on the Watergate committee and Congressmen on the Judiciary Committee have acted with admirable restraint in their television appearances. If there is one person who has used the medium to distort matters it is Mr. Nixon with his overstatements on requests for documents and his sarcasm about Congress.

Vietnam was the first war played out in television; Watergate is the first Presidential crisis. The public watched and heard the basic facts developed during the hearings presided over by Senator Sam J. Ervin Jr., and listened to the President's defenses in fully-covered speeches, news conferences and carefully-staged question-and-answer sessions.

If the country is divided on impeachment, what better way is there to show the strength of our institutions than to allow the public to sit in the gallery, as it were, as the system works its will before them? Live television coverage is uniquely qualified to do just that.

Walter Pincus is executive editor of *The New Republic* and has worked for N.B.C. News.