

Impeachment: A Prime Time for TV

Whether television will or will not be allowed to report the final phases of the impeachment process is one of those debates curiously outdated. Like it or not television is a fact of life and millions of Americans get their entire knowledge of public events, limited though it is, from the little screen.

The objection is that the television would turn the whole business into a circus with members hamming it up for the folks back home. House Speaker Carl Albert is saying privately he is determined there shall be no repetition in the House of the Senate Watergate hearings which he considered a travesty of orderly procedure.

A test is soon to come when the House Judiciary Committee starts taking evidence looking to an impeachment resolution. Whether this will be entirely behind closed doors is still undetermined. But if reporters are admitted for all or part of the testimony it would seem impossible to keep out TV cameras.

The real test will come, however, when and if the Senate tries President Nixon on the charges presented in a resolution of impeachment coming from the House. At that point, in my opinion, the nation is entitled to live continuous television coverage.

This, say the opponents, would turn the most important trial in the nation's history into a Roman gladiatorial spectacle. That assumes there can be no careful, controlled use of the camera in a formal atmosphere. The United Nations offers evidence to the contrary.

Television cameras are invisible in the General Assembly hall and in the Security Council chambers when an important debate is going on. The sig-

nal goes out without the principals being aware of it. TV specialists complain that the lighting in the Assembly hall is inadequate and that therefore the picture is not as sharp as it might be. So far as the viewing public goes this is unimportant.

Granted the UN headquarters was built in the television era; with comparative little outlay a sound proof booth could be built into the Senate chamber to hold the television apparatus. It could be almost as unobtrusive

as at the UN. With rules governing the privileges of each Senator, of defense lawyers and the managers of the impeachment, the opportunities for hamming it up will be non-existent.

Here is an opportunity for television to prove that it is a mature public service and not just a money machine designed to exploit violence and fear. It must be a pool operation. Sponsors are surely out. At intervals of an hour or half an hour there could be dignified commercial announcements.



A worker installs a TV camera in the Senate Caucus Room.

Sen. Mike Mansfield, the Senate majority leader, favors televising a trial. But he has talked to several of his colleagues who are opposed and, since the Senate by a majority vote must approve, Mansfield is doubtful that the cameras will be admitted.

Consider what is likely to happen in that event. Senators coming off the floor during the trial would give reporters their own versions of how it is going and those versions, needless to add, will not be without prejudice. Transcripts of the testimony carried in full by some newspapers would not be the equivalent of what the viewer could see and hear on his own screen.

At best it is a bad business. At best it is certain to churn up emotions already deeply stirred. But to witness it through a medium that has access to at least 100,000,000 homes is a warrant that the whole truth can be known to those who watch.

Television is not entirely a stranger in the halls of Congress. Presidential addresses have been televised live since the advent of the camera. And now and then committee hearings are opened to TV.

Problems can be overcome. One is how to light the Senate which normally is bathed in a subdued radiance. Surely that can be mastered without drenching the chamber in such brilliance as to drive each Senator to dark glasses.

Network tycoons seem to assume at times that they own the airways. The channels belong to the public and are assigned through an agency duly constituted by law. Here is an opportunity for this fantastic giant of communications to prove that it is a public instrument for the public good.