

George Reedy

## 'No Barriers Between Public And the Facts'

Even though Congress still has to decide whether President Nixon should be impeached and tried, it is not too early to give careful—and, I hope, favorable—consideration to allowing full, live television coverage of the proceedings.

There are issues of public confidence at stake which go beyond the usual questions of press freedom and access to news—and the decision should not be made casually.

Traditionally, both Congress and the judiciary have been reluctant to admit television cameras to their proceedings. I can concede that there are coherent reasons for this reluctance even though I am not certain the reasons are wise. But impeachment is an extraordinary procedure, and whatever may be the merits of the precedents, they cannot be made to apply without some unusual logical acrobatics.

After all, impeachment is a device whereby 535 men and women—435 through indictment and 100 through trial—can take from a man a grant of ultimate power which was given to him by all the people. In the best of circumstances, it would be hazardous for a small group to reverse a decision made by the entire electorate. Our constitution provides no method for direct public participation in the deliberations. But television provides a method for direct public witnessing of the proceedings, and there are values to this that are incalculable.

Admittedly, no device can make the final decision satisfactory to everyone. President Nixon's implacable foes—those who hated him even before Watergate—would regard anything less than 100 per cent impeachment and conviction as evidence of legislative cowardice. His last-ditch defenders would regard anything less than 100 per cent acquittal as evidence of a sinister plot to railroad their hero. A Senate vote somewhere between 50 per cent and the two-thirds required to convict would open up nightmares of recriminations.

But the ultimate popular verdict will rest upon the majority which is in between the two poles. This is a group which can render a reasonable judgment—especially when its members have seen events with their own eyes. In terms of the future of American

unity, the popular verdict is fully as important as the legislative verdict. There should be no barriers whatsoever between the public and the facts.

Legislators, of course, have always resisted the presence of television cameras during legislative sessions. The reason is simply that floor sessions are only a small part of the legislative process and here the lens can distort because it makes one—and not the most interesting—part look like the whole. But an impeachment session would not be a legislative session. All of the events of major importance would take place right on the floors of the House and Senate chambers. The legislators could be relied upon to be present and to listen to the arguments. The speeches would be relevant and cogent. And finally, there would be no precedent established other than the presence of television during an impeachment session—not during a legislative session.

When everything is added together, it seems to me that there is more than ample justification for televising the proceedings in both the House and the Senate. The President should have an interest in having his side of the case stated directly to the people as well as to the Congress. The Congress should have an interest in giving the people an opportunity to see for themselves that the legislative conduct is rigidly fair. The print media should have an interest in permitting the readers to observe for themselves that interpretation and backgrounding is based upon fact and not distortion.

But the most important interest to be served is that of the people themselves. The presidency belongs to them—not to the Congress or to the media. If Congress is to direct a change in the occupancy of the office, they have the right to be present, at least as spectators, and there could be grave consequences were they to be denied a right so readily available.

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