

The Awesome Task

As the House Judiciary Committee conducts its hearings to determine whether there are sufficient grounds to impeach the President, the focus of attention and debate should be solely and sharply on the evidence by which Richard Nixon's past conduct will be judged. Under such circumstances, any speculative counting of future votes in Congress demeans what Representative Edward Hutchinson, the committee's ranking Republican, has rightly called that "awesome task." Equally offensive would be the continuation by the White House of the public relations campaign that reached an all-time low in the labored "theological" defense of the Watergate transcripts by Dr. John McLaughlin.

Such diversionary mass-appeals are, at this stage of the proceedings, both irrelevant and disruptive. They deliberately aim at perpetuating the impression that the case of Richard Nixon is a partisan matter, thus undermining the credibility of the impeachment hearings. Such propaganda exercises are simply an extension of the by-now nauseatingly familiar tactics known to the inner circle of the Nixon White House as stonewalling, toughing it out, programing, stroking.

Nixon loyalists still try to preserve the myth that the President has merely been the victim of overzealous aides. Yet in discussing the Chief Executive's accountability, James Madison said in 1789 that since the President is empowered to dismiss those responsible to him, "it will make him, in a peculiar manner, responsible for their conduct, and subject him to impeachment himself, if he suffers them to perpetrate with impunity high crimes and misdemeanors against the United States, or neglects to superintend their conduct, so as to check their excesses . . ."

The multiplicity and seriousness of the charges against the President make it imperative for the committee to conduct the hearings with all the thoroughness and judgment at its command, without allowing its course either to be impeded or rushed to premature conclusions.

The tone set by Representatives Rodino and Hutchinson, as they opened the hearings last week, justifies the American people's expectation that the historic procedures will be carried forward with fairness and decency, but with unyielding determination to present the truth to Congress and the nation.