

Politics & People

By ALAN L. OTTEN

The Right Vote

This column may appear ridiculously naive to many, if not most, readers.

It argues that if and when an impeachment vote finally occurs in the House and then in the Senate, most members will vote their consciences; they will follow not some small-minded goal of self-interest or partisan advantage, but rather try very hard to do what is fair, right and best for the country.

That clearly isn't the fashionable press view. Despite lawmakers' protests to the contrary, many newspapers, magazines, and broadcasts cynically suggest that most Senate and House minds have long been made up—and often, made up from the meanest motives.

Several papers, for example, have published likely Senate line-ups on impeachment, as though the House had already voted to impeach and the Senate had already debated the question. They've listed the "sure" votes to acquit the President and the "sure" votes to convict him, those leaning one way or the other, and the handful of weak-minded, undecided Senators. Story after story has analyzed how President Nixon is extending favors and special treatment to conservative Senators, who are thus certain to stonewall it for him when the crunch comes.

There's talk of scores of liberal Democrats who've been laying for Mr. Nixon for years and will now let him have it, even if John Dean is proven the greatest liar since Munchausen, and of scores of old-line Republicans who'll vote against impeachment even if Mr. Nixon admits on nationwide TV that he personally tapped Larry O'Brien's phone at Watergate.

Still more devious motivations have been dredged up by other correspondents. Election-jittery GOP lawmakers will vote to impeach so that the unpopular President Nixon can be replaced by a more popular President Ford well before the November balloting. Democrats will string out the proceedings and may even vote to acquit their old enemy to keep him in there through November. House and Senate supporters of Nelson Rockefeller, Charles Percy, Ronald Reagan and other ambitious Republicans will support the President simply to keep Mr. Ford from moving into the White House and thus getting a leg up on the 1976 presidential nomination.

And there have been numerous accounts and even comic strip sequences of lawmakers anxiously seeking public opinion on the subject—sending out questionnaires, taking polls, exchanging intelligence with their colleagues—to be sure of casting the politically safest vote.

Much of this seems not only silly but dangerous—unfairly insulting to conscientious Congressmen, and serving to undermine still further, beyond the already-extensive Watergate damage, the public's faith in the governmental process.

Naturally, House and Senate votes on impeachment may never take place. The

President, despite all that he and his family and his staff have been saying the past few days, may yet resign, or step aside temporarily under the 25th Amendment. Assuming he means what he says, however, the House at some point relatively soon, and in all likelihood the Senate somewhat later, will approach a racking Moment of Truth.

There's no question, of course, that some Congressmen and Senators will vote for the President almost no matter what, and some will vote against him almost no matter what. But both these groups are surely quite small, far smaller than most news accounts suggest.

Another somewhat larger group on each side is predisposed for or against him and will be sifting the evidence with this initial bias, but even these men and women are far from irrevocably committed.

And that leaves by far the largest group waiting to see and hear the evidence, and to decide on that basis and on the basis of some inner voice of conscience telling them what is right and proper.

Even for those primarily seeking the most advantageous or safest political path, the way isn't going to be all that clear. Party leaders promise to keep hands off. Polls will almost surely be ambiguous. Back-home pressures will be strong from both sides.

The average Republican legislator, for example, might keep many large contributors and devout party members happy by voting for Mr. Nixon, but thereby estrange many moderate Republicans and independents. On the other hand, a vote against the President might please the latter groups but make bitter-end enemies out of the more regular Republicans.

The portents may, in fact, be so mixed as to indicate that the member might just as well heed his conscience. Even many of these reelection-worrying lawmakers could conclude that doing what they consider right may, in the end, be the best politics for November.

More importantly, however, most members are sure to be awed by their unprecedented responsibility, by the knowledge that they will be making a decision, of historic importance and momentous consequence. Every Representative and every Senator is well aware that these proceedings involve not merely the guilt or innocence of a President, as fateful as that issue may be, but also to a substantial degree the future of American democracy.

For the manner in which the proceedings are carried on, and the way in which the House and Senate members reach their verdicts, will largely determine just how much bitterness and frustration lie festering thereafter in the public's mind, and how soon and how easily the process can be begun, whether under an acquitted President Nixon or an elevated President Ford, of rebuilding and restoring popular faith in government.

With such matters at stake, it really doesn't seem all that naive to expect most Representatives and Senators to cast their votes not from vengeance or friendship, not from narrow interest of self-preservation or party loyalty or ideological gain, but rather, on the basis of a thoughtful weighing of the evidence, close attention to the lengthy arguments and debate, and the most serious, deepest soul-searching.

It will, for most members, be an excruciatingly difficult vote. After all, they'll be stuck with their consciences for a very long time.