

Deciders

By William Safire

WASHINGTON—In the coming debates on impeachment, two groups of Americans will be making the noise and getting the attention while two other groups will be making the decision.

In Group A are the *Nixon-haters*. In the eyes of their most vigorous opponents, the Nixon-haters are the flotsam and jetsam of American political life, unable to win at the polls, sore losers who stridently and unfairly besmear the man who trounced them.

To these Nixon-haters, Watergate is a way to get even, to settle old scores, to show the square booboisie that the elite establishment is still

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boss, and to prove that all those who saw Mr. Nixon as the embodiment of political evil were right all along.

Group B contains the *Nixon diehards*, perceived by the Nixon-haters to be the defiant co-conspirators, dupes, apologists and hangers-on of a gang that tried to gain dictatorial power—hypocrites who mouthed law-and-order slogans while systematically subverting the law themselves.

These discredited diehards are seen to be trying to help their ruined Captain avoid justice, using every tactic of delay and sophistry to get him off the hook.

Like Tony Zale and Rocky Graziano in their last bloody battle, the haters and the diehards climb into the arena knowing each other all too well and expecting no quarter. A generation's experience ensures a bruising conflict to no ultimate decision.

The two other groups—which, together, will decide the fate of this President and the direction of national power—are only now beginning to form. Each is feeling its way toward a philosophy, exploring the long-term consequences of impeachment, and is trying to dissociate itself from the extremists who want to hang tough or hang 'em all.

Group C may be termed the *parliamentarians*, who see a danger of Caesarism in the accelerating concentration of Presidential power, and who are concerned about the way the separation of powers has been eroded by an emboldened and imperial Presidency.

These parliamentarians—aware that many of them helped begin this trend in the days of F.D.R.—are anxious to reverse that trend now, especially since needed social legislation is already on the books. They seek to localize and disperse authority in order to make Government more responsive in domestic affairs and less adventurous in foreign affairs.

From that parliamentary mental set,

impeachment of this President is seen as a political imperative. When a President exceeds his authority, he must be struck down, and there may never be another opportunity to act on such a vivid example. In their long view, the case for impeachment is that it is needed to deter strong-willed men from trying to be "strong Presidents," as well as from abusing the power of incumbency to interfere with the process of choosing a Government.

Group D, the *fixed-termers*, concede the need to censure a President who has inadequately defended constitutional rights but argue that it would be a grave mistake to throw out the stable-leadership baby with the Nixon bathwater.

To the fixed-termers, a greater danger than Caesarism today is the steady crumbling of institutional authority, the loss of respect for the processes and places where civilization's values and standards have been kept. They reject modifications in our system that seek quickly to gratify public desires, such as a parliamentary "vote of confidence," preferring instead to make an administration accountable only at the end of a fixed term of four years.

From that fixed term mental set, impeachment—for anything less than attempted treason, bribery, or attempted seizure of dictatorial power—is a debilitating mistake, fixing in precedent a crisis of authority that would make it harder to act as one nation, or for a leader to take an unpopular stand. The then-legitimized threat of impeachment would surely add to the pressure for Presidential resignation under fire, or under a cloud—"quit or be fired" has more potency than "quit or we'll sulk"—and what might be gained in parliamentary responsiveness would be more than lost in fixed-term stability.

Ironically, the fixed-termers are now mainly those who leaned hard against excessive centralization of authority not so long ago and find it odd to be leaning against excessive and sudden decentralization now. Nor do they enjoy the appearance of condoning moral slippage as they try to stop institutional erosion.

But the intellectual and constitutional decision will be made by the swing voters with the long view, the thoughtful parliamentarians versus the advocates of fixed-termed stability, and not by the haters and the diehards.

Which is good. Impeachment is more than a legal trial, or a national catharsis, or a condemnation or exoneration of one man. Political decapitation, if used, would affect the nature of the American system for generations in a fundamental, destabilizing way, and serious challenges to its use for less than high crimes should not be airily dismissed.

The debate about the consequences of impeachment is beginning, and will churn up questions as fundamental as this: How do we safeguard ourselves from our own institutions without making it impossible for our institutions to safeguard us from ourselves?