

Head of THE committee

WASHINGTON — President Nixon's huge mandate one and a half years ago was made possible in large part by the support of middle-aged, middle-income, middle-educated, metropolitan white Catholic ethnics who were traditionally Democratic.

Ironically, that description just happens to fit the man who is responsible for conducting a fair investigation into whether the President should become the second President in history to be impeached.

It is a fortunate accident of history that placed Peter Rodino Jr. (D-N.J.), in the chairmanship of the House Judiciary Committee at this moment. He has believability. He comes with little of the regional antagonisms or philosophical biases that could have made another chairman suspect.

Rodino is saved by his very ordinariness. He has a regular Democratic liberal voting record, but he has never been out in front on anything controversial that anyone can remember. He is neither autocratic nor bombastic. Nixon cannot denounce him as another prejudiced Kennedy intellectual, as he did special prosecutor Archibald Cox after he fired Cox.

The democratic process has apparently produced, in short, a politician in whom the public can have confidence at a crucial moment. This is not to say that Rodino may not make mistakes. He is in a virtually

unprecedented situation. He is proceeding with caution, but his control of the 38-member committee, which spans a wide gamut of ability and ideology, is precarious at best.

Yet the democratic system has a way of bringing out the best in ordinary people. Harry S. Truman is the most famous example of unexpected good sense and courage in a man who had seldom been called upon to use such qualities.

Rodino thus far has projected an air of restraint, dignity and determined competence. His 26 years in Congress have instilled in him no visible flair for dash or eloquence. He reads his statements before the TV cameras in a stumbling monologue, as though afraid to get one particle wrong.

He had the sense not to let his ego get in the way when the President forbade the professional committee staff from hearing the White House tapes but said Rodino and the ranking GOP minority member, Edward Hutchinson, could listen to them alone. Rodino quietly acknowledged that he and Hutchinson are not sufficiently steeped in the details and legal implications to detect crucial tape portions without staff help.

Rodino, a second-generation Italian, is a true son of middle America, sidewalks-of-Newark division. It is fitting that the most historic role in the impeachment process should fall to him.