

Impeachment: Make the Most of It

Edward Engberg

To a child growing up in a northern city thirty years ago, there were few sensations so delicious as to awaken on a cold morning to hear the sound of snow shovels scraping outside against the sidewalk. At the instant of awakening that sound gave life to a special hope, a snowfall so deep as to tempt wantonness against all the rules. Sweet disaster: no school, no errands, no music lessons and no dentist appointments. The cars, and, with them, adult rule would have to give way to sleds and to snowball fights.

Some of the same feeling enlivens the spirits of adult Americans whenever the structure of routine is forced to loosen its grip, as, for example, during the Great Blackout in New York City some years ago. It has something to do, I suspect, with the relish with which some of the pro-impeachment forces go about their work. That and the chance to witness, even to take part in, History; in genuine, spontaneous, circumstantial history, not the kind of non-event which the celebration of our bicentennial now promises to become.

After the spectacle that was made of *An American Family* (You remember: the Louds), no one ought to be too confident in guessing how the media and public form their passions. I would propose, though, that once we look out the window to see how deep the snow really is, we will find that the thrilling prospect of trauma over impeachment won't be there; that we will fall disappointingly short of Hamilton's promise in *Federalist 65*, that impeachment, "will seldom fail to agitate the passions of the whole community and to divide it into parties." And, "It will connect itself with pre-existing factions, and will enlist all their

animosities, partialities, influence and interest on one side or the other."

What is likely to happen instead bears more on the confidence of Pete Rozelle than it does on that of Peter Rodino. It might be almost as true as it is banal to observe that politics has become one of our top half dozen or so spectator sports. The polls, as someone has remarked recently, show the citizenry to have divorced itself from politicians in a way that is qualitatively different than was the case, say, even five years ago. So far as

**... once we look out
the window to see how
deep the snow really is,
we will find that the
thrilling prospect of trauma
over impeachment
won't be there ...**

polls express anything very complicated, they express not the act of skepticism or cynicism of people implicated at the fate of the politicians being castigated, but a kind of passive judgment, as if in a market test about the relative merits of cold cereal.

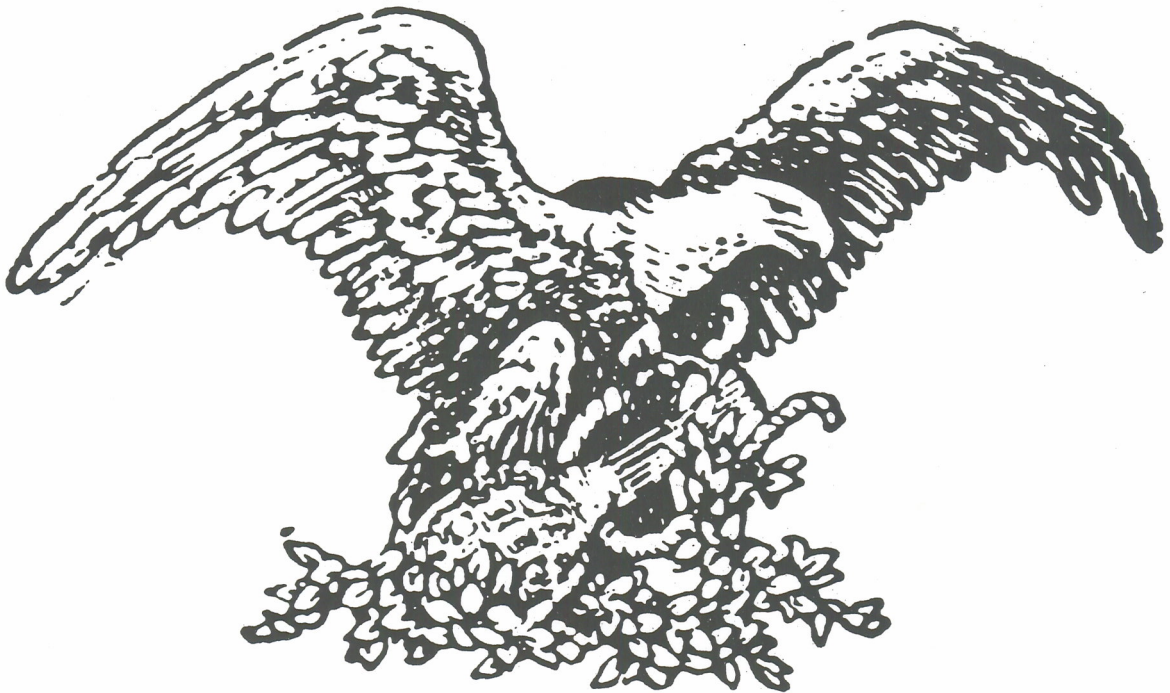
There seems in particular little sign of that factionalism Hamilton feared. Every night of the week some schtickmeister or another appears on the tube, and even though a captive to the marketing sensibilities of the merchant class, pops one-liners off the President like they were the wooden balls people used to throw at living heads in carnie side shows. On the Carson show, the President stands in these

Edward Engberg is Editorial Chairman of SKEPTIC.

nights for his old butt, the popularly despised Consolidated Edison Company. A betting man would likely have to give odds that Howard Cosell had to answer more mail for picking on Bobby Riggs than does Carson for his shots at Rose Mary Woods.

Protectors and attackers of the President seem to share the view that the growing majority for impeachment has more to do with Richard Nixon than with anything else. His protectors call it a media plot. Attackers, in the most charitable view, believe he lacks so much as the minimum moral weight required to hold down the office. To the rest he is Oedipus, absent so much as a redeeming tragic dimension. They sense a pall on the land. The oracle tells them it can only be lifted by expunging the Regent. With memories of Camelot in their heads they believe. (The people who populated Camelot, of course, know better: they will settle for a Hapsburg Restoration.) Maybe so. But there are other tendencies at work which even though they have been rendered familiar by a long line of observers, may still warrant close attention. Tocqueville saw long ago that we would eventually become patisseries for some tyrant, withdrawn into a daydream of individual autonomy, each cut off from the fate of his neighbor. If there was any doubt about it, the tract house and the one man, one car mandate have settled it. What a relief it is to blame Them and not Us for the tensions we have bought with our Individual Freedom. ("Testy Taxpayers," reads the recent *Wall Street Journal* headline: "Some Americans Use Nixon Case to Justify Tax Return Fudging.")

And the tube: a seven ring circus where Dean Martin "roastings," cries



for justice, Dandy Don Meredith, victims of combat, Alistair Cooke, the parents of a kidnap victim, oil company commercials, are all of a size. And all, like the trapeze artist performing without a net, at a comfortably safe remove. We are there and not there, spectators with a "sense of" participation. Each of us pulling for his team: Go get 'em Sam! Atta boy Howard! Who the hell rang in this guy from New Mexico? John Cogley said it: "The sign over the door to hell reads 'continuous entertainment'."

Recall again the Watergate hearings. The cameras never lost the chance to pick out the stars in the house. There was Dick Cavett ("Is that his wife?"). And Yoko Ono, ("Which Beatle is that, again?"). The critics complained: the questions weren't sharp enough. The pace was too slow. When the cast failed to include more biggies, the network gave up full coverage. Yet, and here's the point: we did get a juror's eye look at the principals as long as it was on the air. We were brought close to the stuff of history, and to the evidence.

In short, we moved and are moving

closer to the ideal of popular sovereignty, which may be the only real trauma in prospect. The circumstances offer watershed opportunities, as did, for instance, the Army-McCarthy hearings. In this case is the chance to repossess the Constitution, to make it mean what we want it to mean concerning impeachment; to inveigh national conscience, and so to discover its real size and shape; to employ televisions as the means to participation; to weigh, to

... we moved and are moving closer to the ideal of popular sovereignty, which may be the only real trauma in prospect.

decide, to judge, to learn — about ourselves, about what is important to us, about the kind of government we want, the kind of men we want to have run it, the metaphors and symbols that govern us (e.g. "checks and balances"), about the processes we employ and some we don't but ought to, about

changes we should make in the way we govern ourselves.

It is either that or a summer replacement for the Superbowl. "Moral" and "conscience" are big, big words. They came out of the sixties worn smooth by a rasping stridency. They are being used a good deal now, because they ought to be; but they are also being dropped too glibly in sentences that are about lesser matters, or as a shorthand to elude hard thought. The polls, the head counts in Congress, flit through the news like tote boards at election headquarters. The good guys and bad guys are aligned, and the crossovers watch for motives; the fudgers for nuance, a sign of change. The Impeachment Game clock is on and running. Who will win? If we all sit only as spectators, nobody.