

## Beyond Politics

To an extraordinary degree, the question of President Nixon's possible impeachment has been kept outside the boundaries of politics. Increasingly, however, the question is: how long can this situation continue?

Throughout most of last year, the Democratic leaders in the House and Senate adopted a passive attitude as news of the Watergate scandals broke. It required "the firestorm" of public reaction to the firing of Archibald Cox last October, a reaction that cut across all party and regional lines, to stir the House Judiciary Committee to move on the impeachment inquiry.

Representative Peter Rodino, chairman of the Judiciary Committee, has thus far conducted the inquiry with great circumspection. John Doar, the majority counsel, and Albert Jenner, the minority counsel, both of them independent-minded Republicans, have worked closely together in developing the evidence. The committee has extended every professional courtesy to James D. St. Clair, the President's counsel.

The major decisions of the committee have usually been taken on a bipartisan basis. Thus, several Republican members this week joined with the Democratic majority in voting to send President Nixon a letter warning him that his failure to provide evidence could become part of the articles of impeachment. Every Republican except one voted to subpoena an additional 45 White House tapes.

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Although this disinterested, nonpartisan search for the truth has dominated the foreground of the impeachment scene, partisan political factors now threaten to dominate the background. If the Judiciary Committee fails to meet its informal June 30 deadline for making a recommendation to the House, then House action may not come until late July or early August. Should the vote be in favor of impeachment, a Senate trial might not begin until after Labor Day.

It would be less than ideal to hold the impeachment trial in September and October. Taking retirements into account, roughly one-quarter of the Senators would be actively seeking re-election in their home states while also trying to serve as jurors in the impeachment trial in Washington. If the trial were not concluded by Election Day in November, the mid-term elections might well turn into a kind of referendum on President Nixon's fate. Given Mr. Nixon's low standing in the public opinion polls, such a *de facto* referendum would hardly seem to be in his interests or those of his party.

Alternatively, if the conclusion of the trial were postponed until after the November election, a substantial number of lame duck Senators might be participating in the decision. Both of these hypotheses argue strongly for the Judiciary Committee working "with all deliberate speed" to approximate its June 30 deadline. Committee members could well forgo the 10-day recess over the July 4 holiday, if that should be necessary, and the Senate might similarly waive the traditional August vacation.

Contrary to the cynicism that tends to infect the political process, most members of Congress are likely to decide impeachment on the merits of the evidence and let the political considerations cancel one another out. But they can best do that if they take their decisions before the inevitable pressures in the final weeks of a campaign are upon them.