

SFChronicle

JUN 5 1974

A Young GOP Turk on Judiciary

Bill Cohen (with wife, Diane) was catapulted into the national spotlight when he became the only Republican to vote that Nixon's transcripts didn't comply with the committee's subpoena for tapes

Washington

"Being married to Bill is like hanging on to the end of a comet," says blonde, blue-eyed Diane Cohen. "You never know what's going to happen next."

What happens next in the life of William Cohen is going to matter very much to every citizen of this country, for Cohen the Comet is one of the 38 members of the House Judiciary Committee now involved in the impeachment hearings.

Cohen, a Maine Republican, never expected to find himself in this position — "and I do not relish it," he said. Nor did he expect to find himself catapulted momentarily into the national spotlight as the only Republican to vote that Richard Nixon's tape transcripts did not comply with the committee's subpoena.

"It was midnight when the committee was meeting and I kept saying to myself, 'Oh Jesus, I'm the only Republican who's going to go over,' and not only that, when the vote was 19-19, I knew I was going to be the nut to break the tie.

"One of my Republican colleagues slammed his papers on the desk and said, 'Goddam you!' He was furious, but I knew I had to do something. If the committee didn't vote to respond negatively to the President, it would have lost all the momentum it had built."

Since that time, Cohen's face has become more familiar to television viewers and his office has been flooded with calls from complaining constituents.

He's even gotten some anti-Semitic calls — "and I'm not even Jewish," laughs Cohen. "I'm Unitarian."

Like many members of the House Judiciary Committee, Cohen is young. He'll be 34 in August. For a long time, he didn't consider politics as a career ("Everything that has ever happened to me has been by accident.")

These days, his idea of heaven is coming home in the evening, slapping on his NK-II earphones, turning on his Marantz stereo and blasting John Denver, Carly Simon or Neil Diamond through his head to clear his mind. What he likes about being on the Judiciary Committee is the opportunity to "focus on just one thing" and have more time with his wife and two sons, Kevin and Christopher.

He's started taking piano lessons and he's continued writing poetry — love poems about Diane, elegies to his old basketball coach who is dying of cancer; epics about Watergate; lyric poems about nature.

"I'm thinking much more and writing more poetry, although I have to write on planes. I find poetry to be a stay against the confusion of the world.

"I have no game plan," he says. "As Jefferson said, 'Once a man sets a longing eye upon an office, a certain rottenness sets in his conduct.'"

The son of a Bangor, Maine, baker, Cohen was expected to become one himself. Either that, hoped his father, or an orthodontist. Cohen saw

things differently and hoped for a career as a professional basketball player.

After playing at Bangor High School and Bowdoin College, a chum suggested law school and Cohen graduated cum laude from Boston University Law School.

He returned to Bangor, set up a practice, expanded it, joined the city council, the board of education and, at 29, was elected mayor of Bangor. A short while later, he ran for Congress and was elected handily. The inevitable idea of a governorship — and maybe even a run for the White House later on — has been proposed, but Cohen is not thrilled by it.

"No way," he says. "I wouldn't be willing to make the sacrifices. I like my private life too much to give it up."

As for the impeachment process in which he's now involved, he says: "It is exploratory surgery. It is necessary that we engage in it. If it is determined that a transplant is necessary the body politic will not reject it."

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