



Weighing the Drift Of Impeachment

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"AS OF TODAY, it's an even bet, either way, that the President will be impeached by the House; but as of today, the drift of opinion among House members plainly favors the President. So if I were a betting man, I guess I'd have to bet that impeachment wouldn't be voted."

The foregoing summary was offered by a moderate Democrat with a reputation for cool and astute judgment of the ways of the House of Representatives. If his judgment is correct in this instance, moreover, it is time to think about a possibility that has been getting far too little public attention. This is the possibility that there will be no impeachment after all.

If you begin at the beginning, so to say, with the House Judiciary Committee, you find the outlook for the President less dark than is generally supposed. The chances are high that a bill of impeachment will be reported to the floor of the House. But the chances are also high that the report will lack the support of the kind of large, bi-partisan majority that would impress the House as a whole.

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THERE ARE THREE reasons for this. First, the Republicans on the committee are more and more tending to consolidate behind the President — not least because of what they are hearing from their Republican voters back home.

Second, plain proof of criminality has become the impeachment-test for more than one Democratic committee member.

And third, the prosecution has had its say, and it is now the turn of the defense.

Assume, however, that in about three weeks the Judiciary Committee does in fact report a bill of impeachment by a basically partisan majority. To calculate what may then happen, you must first allow for the effect on the President's fortunes of the bill of particulars justifying impeachment. That will surely affect the drift in the House adversely, at least from the White House standpoint.

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YET YOU CAN already do a kind of miniature Gallup or Harris poll, talking with 20 or so members of the House who represent the three main groups in the House, the Northern Democrats, the southern Democrats and the Republicans. This reporter has just done exactly that, choosing the members queried to have all the main regions of the country also represented.

There will be some Republican defections, of course; but they will not be many. They may be very few indeed, in fact, if the President's lawyer manages to offer a serious defense. Meanwhile, and equally important, the southern Democrats are also tending to consolidate behind the President. In this group, the important figures are the moderates.

Ask key southern Democratic moderates how they feel today. You find just that "drift" in the President's favor that has already been mentioned. Add that even in the north you find some surprising liberal Democratic defections. Hence, as of today, it comes out to an even bet.