

Joseph Alsop

The 'Drift' in the President's Favor

"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.

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.

This last fact is much more important than most people imagine. Suppose, for instance, that the President's lawyer, James D. St. Clair, can solidly prove the final payment of hush money was made without the President's knowledge. That single development might even turn around the committee as a whole.

Assume, however, that in about three weeks the Judiciary Committee does in fact report a bill of impeach-



By Geoffrey Moss

ment 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.

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.

If you make such a poll, you find that it supports the opinion quoted at the outset—which was in fact collected

in the course of the poll. As usual in any poll, there are several uncertain factors besides the virtually sure adverse affect of the bill of particulars in the House Judiciary Committee's report.

The main uncertainty concerns the role of the Democratic leadership. Speaker of the House Carl Albert is grimly determined to make consideration of a bill of impeachment a proceeding above partisanship. But that veteran partisan, who also likes pleasing his Harvard professors, House Majority Leader T. P. O'Neill, is plainly tempted to use all the partisan pressures at his disposal to secure a pro-impeachment majority.

Meanwhile, however, there are some pretty important certainties, too. As noted, the House Judiciary Committee's Republican members are strongly tending to consolidate behind the President, partly because they have begun hearing some sharp things from the folks back home. The same holds true for the great mass of Republicans.

Any Republican voting for impeachment must expect to lose the support of anywhere from 20 to 50 per cent of his own party's voters, making his re-election wholly dependent upon Democrats.

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, rather than the kind of Southerner who regularly follows the lead of Rep. Joe D. Waggoner of Louisiana.

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.