

# The Role of the Electorate in Impeachment

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WASHINGTON, July 11—If President Nixon is ever tried on the charges against him, he will be tried in the court of public opinion, as well as in the United States Senate.

And that raises the question in Washington of whether the latest outpouring of information on the Watergate case is convincing the public one way or the other.

As so many have observed in the last year or so, impeach-

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ment of the President is a political process, not a judicial one. Because it is a political process, it must take account of the electorate, as well as the evidence.

Members of the House of Representatives, who must vote on any bill of impeachment, and members of the Senate, who must sit in judgment on the President if he is impeached, have amply demonstrated their awareness of the weight of public opinion in their deliberations.

As this is an election year for most of them, they have to calculate whether they will profit most from voting against the President or voting for him. Some of them see no advantage either way and try to avoid talking about Watergate at all.

### An Informed Public

Despite the reluctance of some politicians to take the case to the people, public opinion has rarely been as fully informed about any public issue as it has been about Watergate and its ramifications.

The scandal has been a part of the public consciousness for more than two years — since the break-in at the Democratic National Committee in the Watergate Office Building on June 17, 1972.

Interest in the case has been kept alive by a Presidential campaign, five criminal trials, a succession of Congressional investigations, dramatic confrontations between the White House and the investigators and a historic appeal to the Supreme Court.

For two months last summer daytime television was dominated by the hearings of the Senate Watergate committee, and viewers got a liberal education in politics, government, constitutional law and public morality.

There is evidence now, however, that the people may be learning more about Watergate than they really care to know. The evidence is mainly in the public opinion polls and television ratings and in the mail that newsmen are getting.

### TV News Shows Lag

According to a Gallup Poll this month, 53 per cent of those interviewed believed that newspapers, radio and television were giving too much attention to Watergate. A Gallup Poll last month found that fewer Americans favored the removal of President Nixon—41 per cent in June as against 44 per cent in May. Their blood lust, never ravenous, seemed to be abating.

Network television news programs, which gained listeners in the excitement over Watergate last year, lost perhaps 800,000 viewers between January and May of this year.

This weariness with Watergate has not escaped the attention of the White House, which has every reason to welcome it. This week its Office of Communication put out a statement on "The Price of Watergate."

It said the investigation involved, among things, "an array of legal talent hearing 175,000 lawyers, three grand juries in Washington alone, inquiries by at least seven Congressional committees, 53 days of hearings by the Senate Watergate committee, 61 witnesses and two million words spoken, six weeks of secret sessions by the House Judiciary Committee, whose staff compiled a record of over 7,200 pages, and an over-all cost to the taxpayers estimated by the White House at \$15-million or more.

And there is more to come—much more. Today's installment was a stack of eight paper-bound books more than eight inches high—the first 4,133 pages of the information presented to the Judiciary Committee's impeachment inquiry by the committee staff and President Nixon's lawyer.

At the White House today, there was no apparent apprehensiveness about the public impact of this monumental, chronological account of the Watergate case.

The basic facts of it were already known, having come out in earlier investigations or having been generously leaked to the news media.

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### St. Clair Satisfied

James D. St. Clair, the President's Watergate counsel, had heard all the statements as they were delivered to the committee and had concluded that they did not make a prima facie case for the impeachment of the President.

In the words of the White House Office of Communication "there has been not one shred of evidence to link the President with the planning of the Watergate, the break-in itself, or the subsequent cover-up."

Yet, the White House has miscalculated the effect of other batches of evidence, notably Mr. Nixon's tax returns and the expurgated transcripts of White

House conversations about Watergate. Nobody claims they helped the President; the only question is how much they hurt him.

Since May 10, some three million copies of two paperback editions of the transcripts have been sold, perhaps disclosing a hard core of avid Watergate watchers among the yawning mass audience.

In the book trade they say that no such paperback has ever sold that well and that fast before. Also, a hardcover book about watergate, "All the President's Men," by Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein of the Washington Post, hit the top of the best list last week.

The transcripts have the fascination of eavesdropping on the President of the United States and "All the President's Men" reads like a detective story. But today's eight volumes are not so sexy.

They were being admired in Washington today for their clarity and completeness, but they did not look like a best seller. It was a fair assumption that most members of the court of public opinion would, as usual, gain their impressions of the Watergate evidence from the summaries and analyses of the news media. And from the White House point of view, that's not good.