

WXPost *Broadcasting the Impeachment Debates*

BY APPROVING Rep. Wayne Owens' resolution to permit broadcast coverage of open committee meetings in the House, the House Rules Committee has taken the first important step toward letting the entire nation witness first-hand the momentous impeachment debates which begin next week. The full House must still approve the Owens measure, and then the Judiciary Committee itself must agree to let the cameras in. But both hurdles can be cleared easily if enough members recognize the utility of providing direct, complete nationwide coverage of these historic events.

The key question is how much the nation should be able to learn about congressional deliberations on the impeachment of the President—the committee's actions, the House floor debates and, if the House votes for impeachment, the Senate trial. If tradition prevails and broadcasting is barred, the only direct observers of these proceedings would be the few members of the press and public who can squeeze into the chambers. The rest of the nation would be blacked out. Fortunately, more and more legislators are coming to realize how unwise such restrictions on communications would be. In addition to the Rules Committee's 10-3 vote, Rep. Sidney R. Yates (D-ILL.) now has at least 87 cosponsors of his resolution to authorize live broadcasting of the House impeachment debates. So far, however, Speaker Carl Albert and Majority Leader Thomas P. O'Neill have failed to exercise any leadership toward enlarging public understanding of the actions of the House.

There is still some congressional uneasiness about the possible effects of full coverage. Some feel, for instance, that the presence of the cameras is inherently disruptive, but this is not necessarily the case. The major networks, including public broadcasting, have pledged that, if permitted to cover the sessions, they will do so in decorous and unobtrusive ways. This would probably mean continuous coverage without any arbitrary interruptions, using relatively soft lights and fixed cameras. There need not be any reporters cluttering the chamber, any panning of the audience, or any of the other techniques which could create an unseemly-convention-like atmosphere.

The next question is whether, no matter how well the broadcasters behave, the fact of being televised

would alter the legislators' demeanor. Some suspect that, with the cameras on, some representatives might be tempted to grandstand, to engage in histrionics, or otherwise trifle with the solemn undertakings. That danger always exists. But continuous broadcasting could well be a steadying, restraining force, since all members would know that their constituents are watching how they carry out the most important duty of their political careers.

Another problem of possible distortion has been raised, especially by Republicans such as Rep. Delbert Latta (D-Ohio) who worry that the networks might not be "fair." But this is really an argument for more comprehensive coverage, not less, since the dangers of distortion or over-simplification by the media would be greatest, one would think, when the public is forced to rely entirely on compressed, selective reporting through the printed press and broadcast summaries. The more voluminous the evidence, the more intricate the debate, the more ambiguous a few particulars may be, the more important it becomes for the entire nation to have every opportunity to watch the arguments, to hear the tapes, and to weigh for themselves the presidential conduct which is being judged—and the conduct of the Congress sitting in judgment.

The notion that the nation should be watching these events continues to trouble some, mostly lawyers and mostly outside Congress, who equate impeachment debates with criminal proceedings from which broadcasting has traditionally been barred. That analogy does not stand up. However judicious impeachment ought to be in its procedures and findings, it is not, strictly speaking, a judicial process. It is a political process in the most basic constitutional sense; it is the means by which the people's elected representatives assess alleged abuses of the public trust. Public opinion as reflected in the mail or polls should not be the decisive influence on any member's vote. But in the long run popular opinion will provide the ultimate judgments on the outcome and the way in which it is reached. Thus it is in the best interests of everyone for Congress to give the public every opportunity to be fully informed at every stage of the process, by permitting the full, nationwide airing of the debates ahead.