

Vote to Allow Media Is House Milestone

By David S. Broder
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The heavy House vote yesterday to allow radio microphones and television cameras into the Judiciary Committee's climactic debate later this week on the impeachment of President Nixon is a milestone, not only in the President's case but in the long and troubled history of the government's relations with the broadcast media.

Despite claims from some Republicans that the timing of the move will work to the President's disadvantage, the resolution offered by Judiciary Committee member Wayne Owens (D-Utah) won bipartisan support.

Rep. Dave Martin (R-Neb.) argued that the doors of the hearings should have been thrown open to all news media while witnesses were being cross-examined and arguments made by the President's attorney, James D. St. Clair, who will have no part in the televised debate beginning Wednesday.

But most Republicans were satisfied by the assurances their leader, Rep. John J. Rhodes (R-Ariz.), obtained from Judiciary Chairman Peter W. Rodino Jr. (D-N.J.) that the networks would carry, without interruption, the arguments of Republican and Democratic committee members alike.

The House decision means that the beginning and end of the possible impeachment scenario—and perhaps all of it—will be shown directly to the American people.

There is still doubt whether House floor debate on impeachment will be broadcast, but the Senate Democratic leadership is preparing for a televised trial of the President, if impeachment is voted by the House.

The persuasive argument in the House yesterday was forecast last March by Senate Majority Whip Robert C. Byrd (D-W.Va.), when he testified that "it's going to be absolutely imperative that the American people feel that that judgment was objective and fair and correct, and I don't know how this can be done unless that trial is televised."

Owens made the same point yesterday when he said that television could "avoid 20 years of bitterness" about the verdict on the President.



By Bob Burchette—The Washington Post

Judiciary panel member Jack Brooks talks with reporters.

The House has been far more reticent than the Senate about accepting the television era, but a study by the Library of Congress for the Joint Committee on Congressional Operations earlier this year noted that Congress as a whole has been "much more passive" than the executive branch in grasping the "critical role" of the mass media in modern politics.

The House allowed television of its opening-day session in 1947, but the only times the cameras have been back since then were for presidential addresses or other ceremonial occasions. Yesterday's vote was an extension of a permissive rule for televising House committee sessions passed only in 1970.

Because Presidents have been much bolder than Congress in seizing the opportunity for television exposure, many observers have pointed to what the Library of Congress study called "a

definite imbalance" between the branches of government in the use of this prime medium of political communication.

Only rarely in the past—as with the Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearings on Vietnam or the 1973 Senate Watergate committee investigation—have parts of the legislative branch used television to challenge presidential power and policy as effectively as Presidents routinely use television to command the attention of the nation to their speeches and actions.

The impeachment hearings, because of their inherent drama and the ultimate issue of presidential tenure they will determine, represent by far the most crucial test so far of the Congress's ability to adapt to the electronic media age.

Member after member rose yesterday on the floor of the House to warn or implore that the proceedings not become "a circus."