

Impeachment and Disillusionment

Two bumper stickers say a lot about feeling around the country on the long drawn out process of impeachment. "Impeach Somebody Damn Soon." "Impeach Everybody."

Whatever the profound consequences of the decision handed down by the Supreme Court and the President's response, for most Americans one question is likely to be paramount: Will this further delay the business of impeachment and prolong the uncertainty?

The recent poll showing that 54 per cent of the respondents thought they were getting too much Watergate and impeachment was a superfluity. It has been obvious for some time that the intricacies of the Nixon scandals, the columns and columns of transcripts, testimony and leaked reports were beyond the average citizen. They were simply turned off.

In an ideal society, this should not be so. An issue of such grave meaning for the future of the nation should be the subject of debate in every marketplace, with no falling off in the popular interest. But—whether because of the mountain of material brought to light or the prolongation of the ordeal or both—that is not so.

The sharp decline of concern over Watergate and impeachment is part of a general disillusionment with the political process and politicians of whatever party. This is reflected in a variety of ways as anyone traveling through the country quickly learns.

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Voter turnout in primary elections approaches nearly record lows. While the theme of "turn the rascals out" promises to dominate this fall, it is a fairly safe prediction that the proportion of registered voters going to the polls will be low. The disillusion is with the system of representative government and that is the gravest comment on this moment of doubt and uncertainty: the underlying belief that elections can do little or nothing to change the harsh conditions of life in an era of inflation.

Commenting on his unsuccessful run in the California Democratic primary for governor, William Matson Roth, a businessman and a good government candidate, said in his valedictory after the election that, while Watergate was the great excuse for the unconcern with politics and the distrust of politicians, it was not reason enough.

"There has been a failure of leadership not only in politics, but in government, business, education, the press and the churches . . . We have become a self-indulgent people, led by self-indulgent leaders. The ideal of citizen participation has shriveled under the impact of inequitable social and economic conditions, low-doings in high places, bombardment by commercial television and mass urban expansion."

This cannot be dismissed as merely the frustration of one who ran fourth after moving ceaselessly up and down the state and spending \$1.3 million, a large share of it his own and his family's money. It is the thoughtful reflection of a cultivated man who plunged into the arena of elective politics out of a sense of public obligation.

Especially with a generation brought up on television name identity is a

great hurdle. The winner in the California Democratic primary was Edmund G. Brown Jr., whose father had been governor of the state for two years. Many voters could identify only Brown, who won with 20 per cent of the electorate.

The unanimity of the Supreme Court was a fortunate outcome. The three justices appointed by President Nixon voted with the five who had served on the bench prior to the Nixon presidency. Justice William H. Rehnquist, the fourth Nixon appointee, had disqualified himself because of his role in the Department of Justice prior to serving on the Court. A divided Court would have added to the confusion and disillusion growing out of the ordeal of the Nixon scandals.

Chairman Peter Rodino of the House Judiciary Committee is determined that the Supreme Court ruling requiring the President to produce the tapes shall not be used as an excuse to delay the work of the committee now in its final phase. Delay taking the trial of the President in the Senate, following a vote of impeachment in the House, beyond the November election could be a last minute tactic of desperation by the White House. Die hard Nixonites on the committee might be tempted to try that tactic. But with a solid majority, including many of the Republicans, behind him, Rodino can frustrate such an attempt.