

Chairman and Skilled Politician

Peter Wallace Rodino Jr.

By MARTIN TOLCHIN

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, May 24—Representative Thomas P. O'Neill of Massachusetts, the majority leader, reflected recently on the pressures that had been placed on the House leadership to appoint a select committee to explore possible impeachment proceedings against President Nixon, rather than place the responsibility on the untested new chairman of the House Judiciary Committee.

"Manny Celler was a giant around here," Mr. O'Neill said, referring to the Brooklyn Democrat who had headed the committee for 22 years until his defeat in 1972. "Peter Rodino was an unknown quantity. He was a flame under a bushel basket."

The early qualms are all but forgotten, however, especially by the Democratic leadership. "I was at a leadership meeting the other day with Mansfield, Byrd, the Speaker and McFall," Mr. O'Neill said, referring to Senators Mike Mansfield and Robert C. Byrd, the majority leader and whip, respectively; Speaker Carl Albert and John J. McFall, the House Democratic whip. "The praise for Peter was out of this world. Nothing but exultations. He's kept his cool during the entire thing. He's been in command right from the start."

"He's enhanced the stature of the Congress when we were at low ebb," Mr. O'Neill continued. "The members of the Congress have the inner feeling that the right thing is being done."

The praise comes from both sides of the aisle for Peter Wallace Rodino Jr., a poetry-writing, opera-loving product of the Essex County New Jersey Democratic organization, who seemed little more than a routine politician during his first 12 terms in the House, with an impeccably liberal voting record. Mr. Rodino chaired the immigration subcommittee of the House Judiciary Committee until last year, achieved few accolades for his chairmanship and some criticism that his committee had failed to fully exercise its oversight jurisdiction of the Immigration and Naturalization Service.

Last year, at the start of his 13th term, Mr. Rodino found himself presiding over two momentous investigations, either of which would

have taxed the most experienced legislator: the Presidential impeachment investigation, and the investigation into the fitness of Mr. Nixon's nominee for Vice President, Gerald R. Ford.

The Ford investigation was completed with dispatch, with Mr. Rodino voting against confirmation while speeding committee approval of the appointment—a vote that some critics interpreted as a bow to his predominantly black and Puerto Rican district in Newark. The impeachment investigation, however, has lingered on, at a pace that some critics first thought was too slow. The slowness, however, allowed Mr. Rodino to maintain a bipartisan approach, and the chairman now finds himself in the happy position of being praised for being himself and acting with deliberation and reflectiveness. It is the caution of the skilled politician—the survivor.

"He has an understated, mild manner with a backbone made of steel," said Representative Edward I. Koch, Manhattan Democrat. "He's a great chairman, who has kept a bipartisan majority operating continuously and brought the committee together on every issue, so that the President can never scream 'partisan foul.'"

Mr. Rodino, who first found the impeachment investigation "an awesome burden," now finds it an inescapable responsibility.

"This is forever with me," Mr. Rodino said in a recent interview. "It's with me every waking moment of the day."

It preoccupies his thoughts from the moment he arises, at 7 o'clock in the morning, until he retires at 1:30 the following morning. It is with him during his 14 hour day on Capitol Hill—even during the paddle ball games he enjoys in the Rayburn Building gymnasium. And it is with him when he retires to his Capitol Arms apartment, and listens to his collection of operatic records.

Outwardly hail-fellow-well-met, exchanging small talk with colleagues on the floor of the House and in the Capitol corridors, the chairman is inwardly a private person, uneasy with his new celebrity. He tells friends that he has an acute sense that history is looking over his shoulder.

Mr. Rodino, was born on June 7, 1909, in a Newark tenement on "Drift Street,"

the title of one of his unpublished novels. His father, a skilled worker, came to the United States when he was 16 years old. His mother died when he was 4 years old, but Mr. Rodino still remembers her. "She would tell my father, 'look after him, he's going to amount to something.'"

Prodded by these expectations, he progressed from Barringer High School to the University of Newark and the University of Newark Law School, working his way through. Mr. Rodino married a high-school classmate, the former Marianna Stango, shortly before Pearl Harbor, enlisted in the Army and won an overseas promotion to captain. They have two students, and Margaret, the wife of Newark Municipal Judge Charles Stanziale, who made Mr. Rodino a grandfather with the birth of a daughter, Carla.

He left his law firm last January with his appointment as committee chairman.

Mr. Rodino has always represented at least a part of Newark, where he now lives in a 10-room frame house. When the state was redistricted last year, Mr. Rodino had the option of representing all of Newark, or running against his former roommate, Representative Joseph G. Minish, to represent the suburbs.

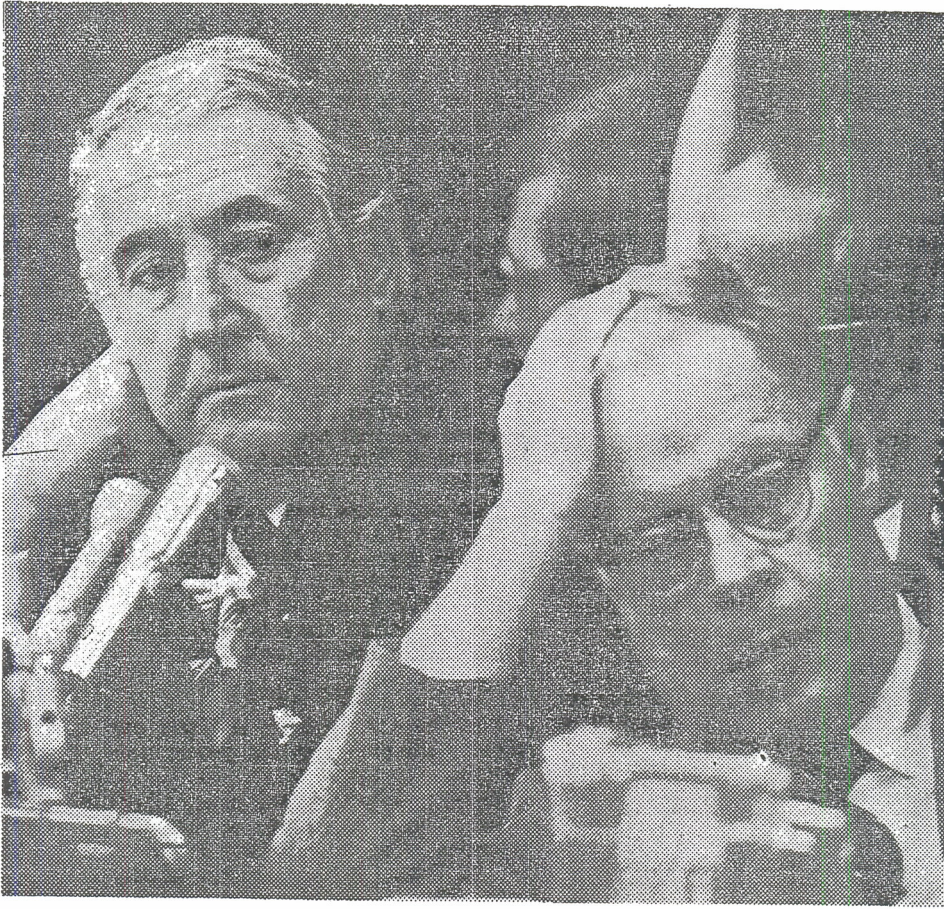
He chose Newark, on a temporary basis, and has since spent some of his political energies in an effort to get redistricted back into the suburbs. In the Newark district, 52 per cent black and 10 per cent Spanish-speaking Mr. Rodino turned back a primary challenge in 1972 with 57 per cent of the vote.

In his career as a legislator, Mr. Rodino said that he was proudest of having written sections of the Civil Rights Act, including the Fair Employment Practices Amendment and introducing immigration reforms, including the removal of national origin quotas for immigrants from the Western Hemisphere.

Has the impeachment investigation changed him? "What can I say?" he asks. "I'm the same fellow I've always been, although I know there's been nothing like it before. Nothing has such implications for the people and the country."

"I know the gravity of it," he continued, "and no matter what, it's got to be done right."

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Peter W. Rodino Jr., left, and Edward Hutchinson, Republican of Michigan, listening yesterday during the House Judiciary Committee debate on impeachment.