

Idealism and Legalism

Millions of Americans now have the opportunity of watching the operations of the political process in an extraordinary undertaking, the likes of which have been seen only once before in the history of the Republic—and then not over television. If the issue under consideration—removal from office of the President of the United States—is momentous, the precise path to the resolution of that issue is tortuous and, as became clear yesterday, subjective at every point along the way. Human sensitivities, if not frailties, are the substance of politics.

However, it is worth noting in this season of cynicism about the political process, particularly among young Americans, that several of the more junior members of the House Judiciary Committee have given a moving demonstration of the sincerity and idealism welling up in a new political generation.

No one watching the pained intensity of Wayne Owens of Utah, the deep passion of Barbara C. Jordan of Texas, the articulate enthusiasm of Edward Mezvinsky of Iowa, could harbor any doubt of the potential for statesmanship being nurtured in the Congress of the United States, waiting to emerge onto the national scene.

These are among the half-dozen members of the committee who are under forty, all elected to Congress just two years ago. Instead of the obscurity with which first-term Representatives must usually be content, they have suddenly found themselves in the position of passing initial judgment on high crimes and misdemeanors charged against the President of the United States. While most expert attention is paid to the more senior members of the committee, who have generally maintained a high standard as well, it is these new faces that are giving the wider public particular encouragement that politics need not be the dirty business that it has seemed to be in recent years.

As predicted, the television coverage of the Judiciary Committee hearings lacks the drama of startling disclosure that marked last summer's Senate Watergate hearings. But these deliberations probably give to the public a better civic education in the political process, in how legislative bodies actually work, in the interplay of principle and pragmatism that makes politics move.

From the statements of purpose in the opening debate, yesterday's proceedings quickly plunged into contentious disputation on which lawyers thrive—and the Judiciary Committee brings together 38 contentious lawyers. The issue, though remote from the substance of the case against Mr. Nixon, could become extremely important in the procedures of a subsequent Senate trial, for it involves the amount of detail that should properly be incorporated into a bill of impeachment.

Prosecutors across the land struggle over this legal technique every day, in dealing with ordinary criminal indictments. There should be neither surprise nor dismay that such arguments occur in the extraordinary process of impeachment.

There may be some weariness at the inevitable procedural complications, at rehashing of now-familiar evidence, especially as the immediate outcome of the committee hearings can no longer be considered in doubt. An impeachment resolution will soon reach the floor of the House of Representatives with broad bipartisan support. But an almost addictive fascination still hangs on the sight and sound of the people in the act of decisions of historical moment.