

The Eye of the Camera

Televised Hearings May Show New Maturity in U.S.

By Haynes Johnson

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Twenty years ago the snarling faces of Joseph R. McCarthy and the gentle demeanor of his adversary, Joseph Welch, came into our homes and affected our lives. The age of the live televised drama was fully upon us.

Ever since then television has enabled us to participate in all the great moments of our times—the nomination, inauguration and death of Presidents, the journey into outer space and the landing on the moon, the wars overseas and the riots at homes, the demonstrations and the protests that continually attend the clash of issues.

Now we are witnesses to the most fateful deliberative democratic process, the impeachment of a President.

In the terminology of the TV medium, the impeachment hearings have been neither "hot" nor "cool." They have not degenerated into demagoguery, as some had feared, nor have they been marked by total decorum. They have had their moments of genuine eloquence, and their hours of tedium filled with wrangling over lawyer's language and parliamentary maneuvers.

But by and large the hearings have been characterized by patience, good humor and seriousness.

That is not to say the eye of the camera is an unseen, unfelt force. It is pervasive and influential.

When the members were enmeshed in their long debates over "specificity" Friday, James R. Mann of South Carolina expressed a concern that television was unduly influencing the proceedings.

He had to conclude, he said, that the objections being raised were not substantive, were not procedural. As he had predicted, he went on, "the arguments made here in front of these cameras would not be made for the benefit of me as a

member of this committee." Then he said:

"I do not think Mr. Sandman would be so strident or even so partisan if these proceedings were not being conducted to influence the opinions of the American people."

In other words, if they were not being conducted over national television.

We also have seen examples of grandstanding for the cameras. Late Friday

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night, Delbert L. Latta of Ohio drew laughter — and made his point — when he stacked book upon book of evidence before him until they formed a massive pile.

"I would just like the American people to know what we are talking about," he said. "And this . . ."

At that point Chairman Rodino banged his gavel and said, to more laughter, "the time of the gentleman has pired."

Latta correctly replied: "I don't believe I need any more time, Mr. Chairman."

These incidents have not been the norm. The earlier fears that television would transform solemn deliberations into a partisan political carnival have been unfounded.

Part of the reason probably stems from a recognition of the truly historic nature of the proceedings. But perhaps part has to do with the long-established role of television.

A generation ago, when television was beginning to have such profound influence on our lives, sensation and drama surrounded the early TV hearings. Americans were transfixed by the Army-McCarthy hearings and the earlier Kefauver crime investigations. Work stopped, the country was gripped by tension and excitement, and everywhere you could hear people dis-

cussing the latest dramatic development.

Kefauver and Costello, Cohn and Schine, McCarthy and Welch instantly became known to all. Overnight it was possible to become celebrated — or notorious. Television, it quickly became apparent to the ambitious, could be used to advance or destroy careers.

It worked for some and failed for others. Rudolph Halley, the obscure young counsel to the Kefauver committee, immediately sought to become mayor of New York. He didn't make it, and dropped back into obscurity. John F. Kennedy, the embodiment of TV star personality, employed the medium better than any public figure before or since and became President.

Just to be a chairman of a widely publicized TV hearing meant you immediately were considered as a potential aspirant for higher office. Kefauver tried to become President. Even a year ago Sam Ervin became, to many Americans, a national hero. He was, as those TV shirts then in vogue proclaimed, "Uncle Sam."

It is doubtful that television will perform that magic for these proceedings, and properly so. Whatever "star" quality exists lies in the collective sense and not the individual. It is the committee, and not the one congressman or woman, that is playing a leading role.

We are seeing something more significant: the way a congressional committee really does work; the wide range between the rare moment of eloquence and action and the customarily stiff procedure and stilted language about the "gentleman" and the "gentle lady;" the glimpse of the young Republicans who will inherit their party's future (Railsback, Cohen, Butler, Hogan) pitted against the old (Hutchinson, Dennis, Mayne and Latta); the recognition that, no matter how much regionalism has de-

clined, accent and local style still are clearly represented in the political process.

Beyond all this is another element that distinguishes today's hearings from the past. Greater maturity. On the first two days of the hearings, for instance, there were bomb scares and an attempted interruption by a protester. They created scarcely a ripple; both the committee and the networks treated them for what they were—insignificant incidents.

It may well be that television, the politicians and the public have come of age at precisely the right moment: when they were forced to share in the most critical judgment of a lifetime.

In this sense, each is exercising a subtle influence on the others.

Yesterday, in an unusual Saturday session for Capitol Hill, Larry Hogan of Maryland told a personal story to illustrate the point.

"When I returned last night," he said, "my wife, who had been watching the deliberations on television, reminded me that many of the prior impeachments were not handled by the Judiciary Committee, and she wondered if the deliberations would take as long if Speaker Albert had entertained sending it to a select committee made up of non-lawyers if it would take us as long to complete it."

"She also then said that she understands full well why lawyers are barred from serving on grand juries."

The reaction of Hogan's wife, or the wives and husbands of other members, to the television scene may not have been the cause, but yesterday the committee was acting more like statesmen than lawyers.

After having lived with television so long, we are all our own best TV critics. But some of us seem to have more influence than others.



By James K. W. Atherton—The Washington Post

House Judiciary Committee counsel John Doar listens to impeachment debate. TV camera can be seen in background.