

Feeling at Home in the House

A Commentary

By Nicholas von Hoffman

The television lights make the place look like a Las Vegas gaming room where the sun never rises and the people never leave. That is how many of them in the Judiciary Committee room must feel. A staff person remarks in sympathy that Doar has lost weight and Don Edwards of California pulls down the bags under his eyes to indicate fatigue.

But Albert Jenner, who is 67 years old, has on a bright pair of argyle socks while he gives off an energetic equanimity. During a recess he puts his committee papers in what is suspected of being a genuine Mark Cross briefcase while he explains that his years as a trial attorney have taught him not to leave such stuff around, and then, in answer to a question, says yes, it's true, he wouldn't be surprised if he had three hundred bow ties. "I've kept every one since high school. I have fat ones and thin ones. You can't wear the same one often."

Jenner is the Republican counsel who has moved over to the Democratic side of the committee's legal staff for failing to defend the President. But that's a task no one has been able to accomplish. There are no defense witnesses, no defense offerings of evidence. Other than one snippet of tape offered by Mr. St. Clair, they do not exist. No more than there is a defense theory of the case, a defense alternative explanation.

Everybody, or nearly everybody, loves Jenner. It is

whispered that he is the most brilliant trial lawyer in the country, a giant in the profession and that when the drama begins in the Senate he will present the House of Representatives' case. The radical affection for Jenner is the most extreme case of our generally going cow-eyed over the Republicans who want to impeach the President. Some of us have discovered in Hogan of Maryland, a man for whom we didn't have a decent word two weeks ago, an incisive mind and bed-rock honesty. And when M. Caldwell Butler of Virginia, who looks even more like the kindly old judge in the flesh than he does on TV, offers Mary McGrory his Coke, we come near to a choke.

There is much talk about the system really working, really though, and what a marvelous thing the House of Representatives is, and, oh, snobs that we are, how the caliber of the minds and morals to be found therein are really much higher than is customarily thought. At the coffee break private references are made to the solemnity of the occasion that are almost as lead-footed as what some of the congressmen have said before the cameras.

We must be forgiven if skeptics gulp and get teary. The need to believe in the elected representatives of the people is great just now when we are decapitating a President. Nevertheless, the imagination strains at dressing them up in Colonial costumes, at turning the two-tiered room into a legislative Williamsburg. Putting

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a powdered white wig on Thornton of Arkansas, who is considered to have either a bad barber or a terribly cheap hair piece, might help, but we wouldn't want to lose Congressman Wiggins' marcel and Barbara Jordan wouldn't work at all. She was not one of We the People back then. Henry Smith of New York would look splendid if frozen in oil and framed in gold, but the costumers fantasy will do less for New Jersey's Joe Maraziti, this summer's Sen. Montoya, the man the Nixonites yield to whenever they've run out of arguments but not out of time.

On this day, the news of John Connally's indictment has just come out. The sum involved is only \$10,000. Someone in the corridor disbelieves that the old bag of Texas drawl could have done it. "Why, the door-knobs in his place cost more than that." So many indictments and jailings, and in the room Kissinger's name comes up again. Although there is less zeal to nail him than the Haldemans and the Ehrlichmans, the thought strikes that he may no longer be able to extricate himself, but if he does go down with his colleagues it will be over illicit wire tapping, not unlawful bombing.

At this rate every lamp post on Pennsylvania Avenue will be decorated with one of the President's men. Not that the spirit in the room is especially vengeful. It is impossible to picture a man like Donohue of Massachusetts with that look of a benign, embalmed bulldog taking part in a lynching, yet a process of some sort is under way and, even though the rules of parliamentary procedures are followed with punctillio, no one can control who gets threshed and thrashed.

The debate continues, the yieldings and the moving and the objectings, the pretty young women with the serious faces (the House comelies) fetch papers and bring around glossies of the committee to be autographed like the team baseball. Some of the members are as good as they look, others are batting way over their heads reading words written by others for them, but the whole story is getting out to the whole people, all he did and how he did it is getting through and it will end him.