

People Do Govern

By Anthony Lewis

WASHINGTON, July 28—When Representative James R. Mann spoke, the room quieted to catch his low voice. Slowly, reflectively, he said he was troubled by attacks on the Judiciary Committee.

"Do yet in the United States the people govern?" he mused. "I wonder if the people still want their elected representatives to fulfill their oath to preserve, protect and defend the Constitution. Do you want us to exercise the duty and responsibility of the power of impeachment...?"

Mr. Mann was giving expression to a powerful feeling in that room: Something much larger than the person of Richard Nixon was at issue in the committee's debate. It was faith in Congress, in democracy, in the constitutional system.

That feeling, that understanding was what made the roll-call vote on the first Article of Impeachment a moment of such profound emotion. It was impossible to be cynical as those 38 members of Congress, Americans not so different from the rest of us, voted to impeach a President.

The committee's performance went a long way toward answering Mr. Mann's doubts. It was quarrelsome at times, and tedious and frustrating. But with all that, it demonstrated that ordinary men and women can rise to a great occasion—can be trusted with the fate of a great country.

Since the story of Watergate began, there have been those who doubted that America could rouse itself to respond. Others of us, believing in this extraordinary country, were confident that it would confound the skeptics.

If there is vindication of hope of the Judiciary Committee proceedings, it

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is partly because there was no pretense there that the issues were easy. This was not the smooth, corrupting world of public relations. It was a conflict among men and women of diverse views and personalities, representing real interests. The resolution was the more inspiring for the struggle.

In what has happened in the committee room we can begin to see that Watergate may leave America a better country. A first beneficial effect is the restoration of belief in our political process, and especially in the legislative branch of government.

For years the United States Congress has been an object of scorn among students of government. In its weakness, they fairly said, it had allowed the Presidency to grow to imperial dimensions. In its corruption and cowardice it had made people despair of peaceful change through politics and turned them toward litigation or protest.

But now Congress is facing the heaviest of responsibilities without flinching. It is correcting grave abuses of power—and doing so on its own, for once, without relying on the courts to save the Constitution. The system is working.

A second ground for hope in the post-Watergate future is that the episode has deepened our understanding of constitutional values.

Just a few years ago such things as wiretapping and burglary in the name of national security might not have aroused much concern among many Americans, especially those calling themselves conservatives. After the misdeeds of this White House, people see that abuse of official power can threaten their own liberties, not just those of some alleged radical.

Finally, the House committee proceedings offer hope that we can bridge some of the divisions that have weakened and embittered this country in recent years—the divisions of region and class and race and ideology.

The role of the conservative Southerners on the committee was noteworthy in this regard. Mr. Mann of South Carolina, Walter Flowers of Alabama and Ray Thornton of Arkansas were among the most impressive speakers for impeachment on the Democratic side, M. Caldwell Butler of Virginia on the Republican.

These men were significant because everyone knew that they were acting from no animus toward Mr. Nixon or his conservative policies. They were acting on principle and they found themselves in the moderate center. It was a long way from the old Southern politics of racism and reaction.

There was an especially touching symbol in the relationship between these white southern gentlemen and Barbara Jordan of Texas, a black woman who contributed one of the most remarkable impeachment speeches. She sat near Mr. Thornton and Mr. Flowers, and there was an impression of particular friendliness and mutual respect among them.

The hope for national healing as we purge ourselves of Watergate was the stronger as the committee acted because we could see the process at work. Even the leaders of the House, who were fearful of television in the committee proceedings, surely recognize now that it performed an essential civic function there and must do the same in the floor debate. There were mistakes, but they were the imperfections of humanity. To see the committee was to see ourselves as guardians of the Constitution, and that was strangely reassuring.