

Part 8/6/74 A Guilty Plea

PRESIDENT NIXON has for all practical purposes pleaded guilty. His astonishing announcement yesterday that he was prepared to release highly damaging evidence that he had withheld from the House Judiciary Committee has made his impeachment by the House, as he himself suggested, a virtual certainty. His explanation of what he described as an earlier "omission" of this evidence was not particularly persuasive. Nor did Mr. Nixon's characterization of the material itself do justice to its explosive impact on the main line of defense he has been arguing for well over a year.

For months now, the President has been assuring first the public and then the Judiciary Committee—especially those prepared to argue his case—that he had nothing to do with the Watergate cover-up, that he heard about it for the first time from John Dean on March 21, 1973, nearly a year after it began, and that he had furnished various investigators with all they needed to know about this whole affair. Some very skilled and dedicated advocates of his cause, including Rep. Charles E. Wiggins of California, took him at his word. Yesterday they learned from the President himself, and from the three transcripts that were released from the White House, that once again Mr. Nixon's word with respect to Watergate was not to be relied upon. For what the new transcripts tell us is that Mr. Nixon, in three conversations with H. R. Haldeman less than a week after the Watergate break-in, knowingly conspired in the beginnings of a cover-up—and not for the sake of national security interests but for his own political purposes.

So it is all over. And surely the best evidence that this is so may be found in the response of Congressman Wiggins whose defense of the President throughout the Judiciary Committee hearings rested on a strict reading of the evidence and the law. Presumably applying the same strict tests to yesterday's disclosures, Mr. Wiggins called upon the President to resign. The congressman stated that he would vote for impeachment

if Mr. Nixon declined to step down. There was a sufficient amount of similar sentiment expressed by Mr. Nixon's supporters to indicate that the President's conviction and removal from office by a two-thirds vote of the Senate is almost as certain as his impeachment by an overwhelming majority in the House. Therefore it is plain that one way or another the President is going to leave office before his term is up and what is important now is that this happen in a way that serves the interests of the nation.

Over the past many months we have argued in this space that a presidential resignation unaccompanied by a body of material demonstrating his guilt beyond serious challenge would invite public suspicion and damaging divisions in this country. And we have also argued that only by virtue of the availability of such a record of wrongdoing would Mr. Nixon's own constituency be able to accept such a result. Now those conditions appear to have been fulfilled. The case has been made. The record is there. And that record has been widely accepted as a justification for his departure from office. All that would seem to be lacking—at least in the public record—is the President's own acknowledgement that this is so.

It is now, above all, up to the President. Basically, he has a choice concerning only one matter and that is the manner in which he will depart the office of the presidency and the degree of effort he will make to salvage its dignity and his own. Congressman Wiggins has suggested that Vice President Ford and Chief Justice Burger and the leaders of Congress should meet "to discuss the orderly transition of power from Richard Nixon to Gerald Ford." That is a responsible recommendation to which we would add, at this point, merely the thought that in arranging the terms of this transition some consideration be given to the President's welfare as well as the nation's. This is a time for accommodation all around. The question is how accommodating—and how responsible—Mr. Nixon intends to be.