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Why Mr. Nixon Prefers Delay

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It has been said that Mr. Nixon's campaign venture into Michigan was a "bold gamble," an almost Byronic gesture by this least Byronic of men.

The Republican candidate was behind when Mr. Nixon made his four-hour sweep through the most rural sections of the district, and to the surprise of almost no one, Mr. Nixon included, he lost.

And what have we learned? That Mr. Nixon probably is a drag on the political market? This will come as a sunburst only to people who have been hiding in New Mexico caves since before the earlier special elections.

If the Republican had won that seat, as Republicans have done for 40 years, Mr. Nixon's political clout would not have revived like a watered flower. And although there is a lush profusion of reasons for impeaching him, his calamitous effect on the GOP is not one of them. I say that as a Republican who has never voted for a Democrat and hopes to be forever spared the indignity of having to do so.

The most Mr. Nixon can say for the Michiganders is that they did not bite him on the ear. But it was better for him to have attention focused on them than on his legal problems. His trip triggered a foaming torrent of media analysis, which served his anti-impachment strategy of delay and distraction.

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This strategy is not inelegant, but evidently it is the best one available to him. It involves using every conceivable maneuver, especially withholding evidence, to delay impeachment proceedings and to cripple the Special Prosecutor's ability to try his former White House aides. Another part of the strategy is to distract the attention of the press, public and politicians from the only matter that can get him removed from office — the Watergate cover-up.

If Mr. Nixon is removed it will not be because of anything else that has happened, or anything happening now — not an election result, not a collision with Congress, not a mischievous increase in the price of milk, not an improper anti-trust divestiture of an insurance company from ITT.

If he is removed it will be almost exclusively because of things he did

between June 20, 1972, the first working day after the Watergate break-in, and April 17, 1973, the day he decided to respond publicly to the disintegrating cover-up.

Obviously he has decided not to comply with the Committee's and the Special Prosecutor's subpoenas for tapes of conversations held during the winter and spring of 1973, when the cover-up was not going swimmingly. This is a reasonable decision, assuming (and he is in a position to know) that the anger of the Committee, the Special Prosecutor and the public over withheld tapes can not injure him as much as the contents of the withheld tapes would injure him.

This explains the Orwellian disjunction between his words and deeds: while complaining that "dragging out Watergate drags down America" he

hides the evidence necessary to bring Watergate to a conclusion.

He can hardly be delaying in the confident expectation that some discernible salvation is in the offing. The strategy of delay, like the Michigan stratagem, it is the best way to play a hopelessly bad hand he has dealt himself.

Mr. Nixon is in the position of the man who offended a capricious king. The king said: "I will sentence you to suffer the death of a thousand cuts, but I will not order the sentence for two years, and I will not order it at all if, in that time, you teach my horses to talk."

The condemned man was content, which puzzled a friend, who asked why. "Because," he replied, "in the next two years the king might die, or change his mind—or the horses might talk."

Mr. Nixon is reduced to delaying in the hope that something—anything—will happen to lift the siege. He must know the astronomical odds against that. But evidently he thinks it is safer just to hope for a miracle, something on the scale of a talking horse, than to release the evidence.

That is why his behavior, hunkering down and hoping, speaks with devastating eloquence about the contents of the tapes he is hiding.