

The Last Roll of the Dice?

Nixon Political Clout Shrinks

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In forcing through his own "compromise solution" to the Watergate tapes controversy at the cost of fresh turmoil in his troubled administration, President Nixon has risked his dwindling political capital on what may prove to be a last roll of the dice.

Conservative White House advisers, who applauded the showdown move, predicted yesterday that he will achieve a political vindication comparable to the one that Harry S. Truman eventually won for his firing of Gen. Douglas MacArthur.

But other Republicans inside and outside the admin-

istration said the dismissal of Watergate Special Prosecutor Archibald Cox and the subsequent resignations of the top two Justice Department officials, Elliot L. Richardson and William D.

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Ruckelshaus, would split the GOP leadership into warring factions and leave the President more vulnerable to impeachment or other political retribution.

Whether a serious impeachment effort would begin when the House of Representatives returns Tuesday was in doubt last night. Democratic leaders expressed general indignation

at Saturday's dramatic developments, but no immediate consensus emerged on what the congressional majority would do.

Some Democratic officials, mindful of the reluctance of such men as Speaker Carl Albert to take responsibility for resolving the national leadership crisis, predicted the situation could become as abrasive inside their party as it is within the GOP.

The one solid fact in the political situation is that Mr. Nixon brought the long-festering tapes controversy to his own popular support is a head at a moment when as weak as it has ever been.

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A Gallup Poll released today reports only 30 per cent approval for the President during the Oct. 6-8 period, down 8 points from his brief August "revival" and a new record low for him.

Since that poll was taken, Spiro Agnew, the man Mr. Nixon twice chose as Vice President and helped make a hero to his conservative following, has resigned after pleading no contest to a charge of income tax evasion.

House Minority Leader Gerald R. Ford (R-Mich.), Mr. Nixon's choice to replace Agnew, is left in limbo by this weekend's developments, his confirmation likely to face a long delay in Congress.

The succession of shocks rattled politicians in both parties—but particularly the Republicans. "I just can't believe what's going on in that zoo," Wyoming Republican Chairman Jack Speight told the Associated Press. "It's like 'tune in tomorrow for the next adventure.'"

Minnesota Republican national committeeman Rudy Boschwitz said, "I really don't know what to make of it, you've heard of that play, 'Stop the World, I Want to Get Off.' That's how I feel right now."

Early indications pointed to the likelihood of a split between the GOP's progressive and conservative wings. Presidential assistant Patrick J. Buchanan, a contact point and spokesman within the White House for many conservatives in the GOP, said yesterday that "a lot of conservatives are calling in to say Cox should never have been appointed in the first place, so it's good riddance."

Neither Richardson nor Ruckelshaus was particularly trusted or admired by GOP conservatives, so their departure will not be mourned in that wing of the party, either.

On the other hand, many prominent progressive Republicans rallied immediately to the side of the resigned officials and voiced at least muted criticism of the President.

Typical of them was Gov. William G. Milliken of Michigan, who said, "I deplore what happened. It is a setback in efforts to restore public confidence in govern-

ment. I had welcomed the appointment of ... Cox ... Richardson and ... Ruckelshaus. They are men with a high sense of public service and I regret their departure. "Clearly we face a constitutional crisis," Milliken said, "a question of whether the rule of law will be applied to all in the land."

While the early symptoms of a serious Republican split were visible yesterday, conclusive proof was lacking, for many major GOP officials were either unavailable for comment or deliberately withholding their judgments until the picture clarified.

Among the major and influential Republican figures from whom nothing had been heard yesterday evening were Gov. Nelson A. Rockefeller of New York and Sens. Barry Goldwater of Arizona and Charles H. Percy of Illinois.

The prevailing White House view was that time is on the side of the President, that as the shock of what is being called the "Saturday night massacre" wears off, the legality and propriety of Mr. Nixon's actions will be broadly endorsed by Republicans.

Domestic adviser Melvin R. Laird, appearing on "Meet the Press" (NBC,

WRC), asked the country to withhold judgment until "the product" of the President's proposed agreement—a transcript of relevant portions of the Watergate tapes—is made public.

His colleague, Pat Buchanan, said, "The early (adverse) reaction came from the liberals, but now you'll see things start to swing back. Congress can do nothing before Tuesday, and by then there will be a realization that the President has done nothing illegal."

Buchanan likened Mr. Nixon's actions to Truman's firing of MacArthur for refusing to obey White House orders during the Korean War. "It's unpopular as hell when it first breaks," Buchanan said, "but when you stop to think about it for a moment, you know he's got a right to do it. And you don't go after a President for making an unpopular decision, especially in a period of international crisis like this."

But a public opinion analyst with close White House ties said he thought the ad-

ministration's optimism was ill-founded.

"The President is in terrible shape," he said. "He seems to do things that put him in more of a corner all the time. If there were any people in the administration that had credibility of their own, they were (Secretary of State Henry) Kissinger, Richardson and Ruckelshaus. Now, two of the three have resigned on a matter of principle. This has to hurt him—particularly among those Republicans who have reluctantly supported the President because they suspected the Watergate committee was out to get him for partisan reasons."

This pollster, who declined to be identified by

name, said Mr. Nixon may receive some benefit from the Middle East Crisis, "because people credit him with skill in the diplomatic area, and the fear of war may make the opposition a little less intense."

The President may also "get some benefit from the negative public view of the courts," he said, "but there's almost nothing else going for him. And with Watergate and the Agnew case fresh in people's minds, his accusers and opponents have greater credibility than ever before."

While most of the worries belonged to the Republicans yesterday, there were signs of possible problems ahead for Democrats.

Party leaders outside Con-

gress were expressing condemnation of the President's actions and calling for impeachment or some other strong reaction.

Gov. Wendell H. Ford of Kentucky, chairman of the Democratic governors' caucus, called the firing of Cox "tragic" and said it proved Mr. Nixon's claim to be seeking the full truth of the Watergate case "fraudulent."

Gov. John J. Gilligan of Ohio, voicing similar displeasure with the President's actions, said, "I can't see any way Congress can avoid considering impeachment proceedings."

But there was no clear evidence last night that the Democratic congressional leadership was ready to move in that direction.

While more of the party's moderates discussed impeachment than ever before, the top leaders of the House and Senate expressed no definite plans.

Albert — who is next in succession to the presidency until Ford is confirmed as the new Vice President — was described by friends as being acutely embarrassed at the possibility that an impeachment move might be viewed by the public as a selfishly motivated effort by the Democrats to make him the new President.

The strains of the internal indecision may be reflected when the House and Senate reassemble Tuesday and when the Democratic National Committee meets Thursday in Louisville.