

Why?

4 theories on Nixon's big switch

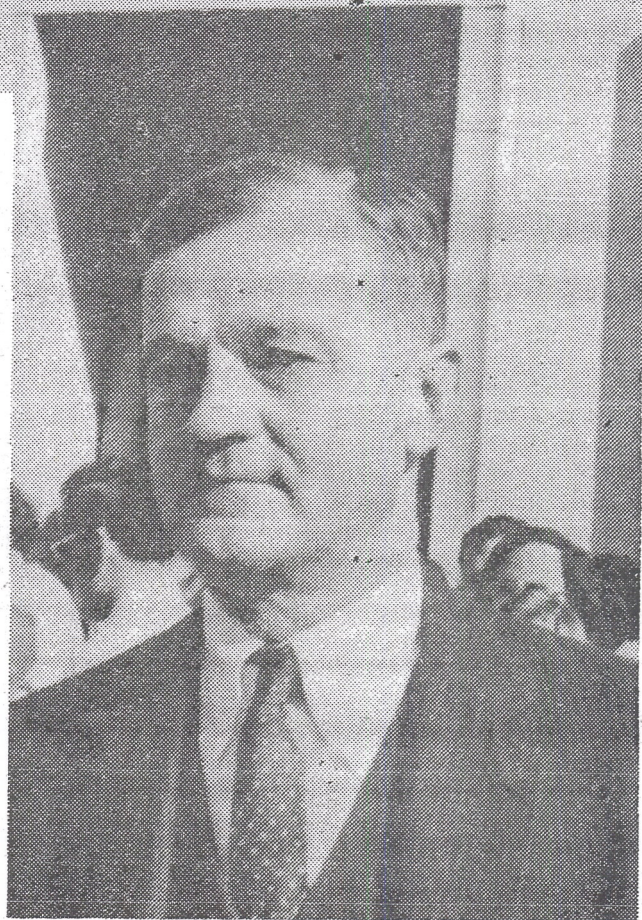
BY MICHAEL COAKLEY
Political editor

WASHINGTON—The question is simply—"why?"

Why did President Nixon, supposedly a rational political man, push himself to the brink of total ruin over an issue on which he was willing to surrender in less than four days?

The official White House line is of no help. Alexander Haig, the President's chief of staff, told the press yesterday that Nixon backed down and agreed to give up the Watergate tapes because he was concerned about national "polarization" over the issue.

There was, in fact, little polarization. Almost everybody—liberals and conservatives, Democrats and Republicans—strongly disagreed with the President's precipitous decisions to fire special Watergate prosecutor Archibald Cox and to ignore two federal court orders to hand over the tapes. Far from a polarizing issue, history recalls no matter which the country ever viewed with greater unanimity



AP Wirephoto

Presidential lawyer Charles Wright leaves court after agreeing to release The Tapes.

of opinion.

Secluding himself at Camp David, Richard Nixon's remoteness makes it all the more difficult to assess his motives. But, difficulties notwithstanding, the process has begun in earnest with several theories flying thru this shell-shocked capital which is still not sure a frighteningly unstable Nixon administration can survive. Among the most prominent:

Theory No. 1

THE PRESIDENT acted because he was scared—scared of being found in contempt of court and scared of being impeached. The outcry against the Cox firing—coupled with the [William D.] Ruckelshaus firing and the [Elliot] Richardson resignation—was overwhelming, far more intense than Nixon had expected by the admission of his own sides.

The outcry included demands for impeachment, demands from such powerful organizations as the AFL-CIO, and such unlikely places as rural Maryland where Rep. Clarence Long reported 206 constituent calls, 205 of them favoring Nixon's ouster.

When the House convened at noon yesterday, eight separate resolutions were introduced which called for outright impeachment or an investigation which could lead to impeachment. Even Republicans on Capitol Hill were saying that if Federal Judge John J. Sirica rejected the President's "compromise" on the tapes and held Nixon in con-

tempt of court, the chances for impeachment would be excellent.

By 2 p. m., when White House lawyers filed into the somber courtroom, there appeared little doubt the President of the United States would soon be a man officially in contempt of a federal court.

SIRICA IS KNOWN as "Maximum John," a reference to his habit of usually giving a defendant the maximum sentence allowed by law. His demeanor thruout the original Watergate trial and the subsequent hearings did nothing to dispel that image.

The Nixon compromise—allowing Sen. John Stennis [D., Miss.] to listen to the tapes but not Sirica—clearly was a violation of Sirica's order, an order upheld by a Federal Appeals Court and one which the White House chose not to appeal to the Supreme Court.

Sirica was ready. So was the House Judiciary Committee from where a recommendation for impeachment could well have come within a month. All of this because of the President's unbelievable actions of last weekend.

Finally recognizing his colossal blunder for what it was, Nixon moved at the last second and did the only thing he could possibly do to save himself from political death. So goes probably the most popular theory.

Theory No. 2

THE WHOLE BROUHAHA was actually a carefully laid plot by the President and his lieutenants to get rid of Cox and prevent him from snooping into new areas which could further damage the administration.

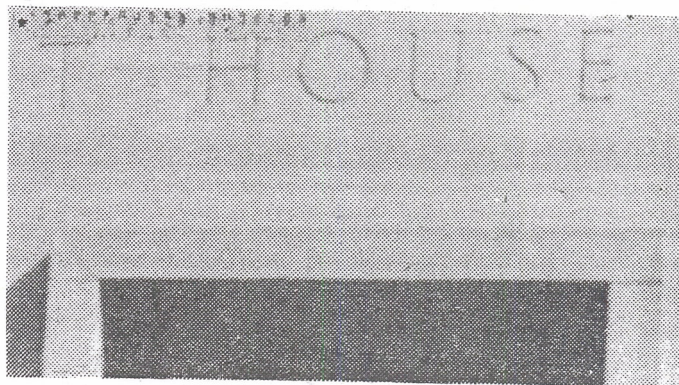
This theory, favored by cynics and not a few Democratic congressmen, rests on the assumption that the President's stated reason for firing Cox in the first place—his refusal to accept the Stennis compromise—evaporates in light of yesterday's development.

There had been recurring reports that Cox was looking into the financial dealings of Nixon's closest friend, Charles G. [Bebe] Rebozo.

Yesterday, the Washington Post, quoting "well informed sources," reported that the White House had asked then Atty. Gen. Richardson about the Rebozo investigation earlier this month, an inquiry which Richardson saw as pressure to "call off Cox" from investigating matters touching Nixon or his close friends.

Monday night ABC News reported Cox had uncovered a million-dollar "private investment portfolio" set up for Nixon and administered by Rebozo.

THE REPORT SAID "an important witness from the



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Miami area" provided the information, which was given to Cox only hours before he was fired and his office was sealed off by FBI agents.

"Described by a source close to the investigation as the 'Nixon Checkers Fund of 1973,' the alleged investment portfolio is being investigated to determine whether large unreported political contributions may have been diverted to Nixon's personal use and whether or not federal taxes were paid on any such amount," the report said.

The White House quickly denied the existence of such a portfolio. But Haig did say yesterday, in explaining to the press why Cox had been axed, that "many of us [on Nixon's staff] had been concerned about the political alignment of Cox's staff and what appeared to be roamings outside the charter of the special prosecutor." He did not explain what "roamings" he was referring to.

It had been a poorly kept secret ever since Cox was appointed that his very existence infuriated the President. It had been an even poorer kept secret that the President was searching for a way to get rid of him. All of this is cited with authority by the many aficionados of Theory No. 2.

Theory No. 3

NIXON MEN ARE nothing if not public relations men. They know how to build suspense, but ultimately turn that suspense into a final resounding victory for their client.

They started last summer with the real problem of how to convince the public that the President was not guilty of involvement in the Watergate coverup as John Dean said he was.

Once the existence of the tapes became known—apparently by accident, but some aren't sure—the White House devised a scheme whereby the President would refuse to surrender them until there was such a hue and cry that he would be compelled to do so.

By then all the other important questions of Watergate would have been lost. All ears would be on the tapes. They would show the President to be innocent [supercynics insert here the possibility of doctoring] and he could then move on to the "Year of Europe" as a fickle public moved on to Monday night football.

This theory presumes Nixon was willing to pay an exorbitant price for a public relations gimmick of dubious value. But there can be no arguing that Watergate has now largely been reduced to several spools of magnetic plastic. If the tapes support the President's innocence he won't be impeached, in spite of his firing of Cox.

Theory No. 4

THIS IS WHAT might be called the "Official Theory," parts of it derived from Haig's press conference yesterday and parts from more candid, but no less loyal Nixon followers.

Haig said Nixon reversed his position because he feared that the "firestorm of controversy" over the weekend shakeup was polarizing the nation so badly that it threatened to cripple his conduct of foreign policy.

Further, Haig conceded the President was concerned by reports that Democrats in Congress might try to hold hostage Gerald Ford's nomination as Vice President until the tapes were released.

These were the only two reasons for the surrender, claimed Haig, who specifically stated that Nixon was not concerned about all the impeachment moves.

The President had in fact gotten the word from Capitol Hill that Ford stood virtually no chance of being confirmed under the present circumstances and that any name submitted for attorney general would likely meet the same fate.

It was this grim reality, and not fear of impeachment or a widening Cox probe, which prompted the turnaround, according to this official theory from mostly official people.

Parts of each of these theories can be combined to create almost endless permutations. Somewhere, no doubt, lies the truth. The trouble, as with all this Watergate mess, is finding it; then getting anybody to believe it.