

Democrats to Press Impeachment Study

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House Democratic leaders said yesterday a planned Judiciary Committee inquiry into whether President Nixon should be impeached will proceed, though his release of Watergate tapes removed much of the heat for immediate action.

There are other charges that go far beyond the tapes that could be grounds for impeachment if proved, said Majority Leader Thomas P. O'Neill (D-Mass.).

O'Neill said the President's move "put a damper on the fire of impeachment. But in no way has it completely halted congressional action."

Rep. Peter Rodino (D-N.J.), Judiciary Committee chairman, had announced at noon that he would immediately set in motion machinery for the inquiry. Rodino was not available after Mr. Nixon in mid-afternoon agreed to give up the tapes to a federal judge, but an aide said Rodino had already taken this possibility into account and stood on his earlier statement.

Reaction of House members to Mr. Nixon's action was generally along party lines. Democrats said there were plenty of other grounds to impeach him, but

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Republicans said release of the tapes knocked the props from under the impeachment move which has been building since Mr. Nixon ordered Watergate Special Prosecutor Archibald Cox fired while Congress was out of town on a Veterans Day weekend.

Rep. John Culver (D-Iowa), head of the liberal Democratic Study Group, said he believed the Rubicon of impeachment had been crossed and that the impeachment investigation will continue.

"It took the events of last weekend to trigger the action," said Culver. "But it set in motion certain forces and we aren't going to turn around now."

There were these other developments yesterday:

• House Speaker Carl Albert of Oklahoma emphasized that he wants the House to move as speedily as possible, consistent with the need for a thorough investigation, on confirmation of House Minority Leader Gerald R. Ford of Michigan to be Vice President. Albert, who would become Presi-

dent if Mr. Nixon were impeached, convicted and removed from office before Ford was confirmed by the House and Senate, issued a statement saying that Ford's nomination should not be held hostage to any impeachment proceeding.

• Democrats in both House and Senate pressed forward with their proposed legislation creating an office of special prosecutor independent of the President to continue Cox's work. Ninety House members cosponsored such a bill.

• House Republican leaders told the White House that Mr. Nixon must not only release the tapes but appoint another special prosecutor to search out the Watergate truth, or else lose support of some House Republicans in an impeachment fight.

Events occurred yesterday in this order as the House, where under the Constitution impeachment action must start, reconvened for the first time since Cox was fired:

Democratic leaders and the party's steering committee met in the morning to discuss further plans to refer impeachment resolutions to the Judiciary Committee for consideration. Speaker Albert then told a press conference he considered the President's action in firing Cox divisive when the nation needed unity, and said he expected the Judiciary Committee to begin consideration of impeachment resolutions "without delay."

Rodino stood beside Albert and announced that he "will immediately initiate consideration of appropriate procedures for handling"

impeachment resolutions and "for the conduct of appropriate inquiries."

"Events of the past few days leave us little choice at this time but to move forward with preparations for impeachment proceedings," said Rodino. "The President has precipitated a grave crisis that raises the most serious questions about the integrity of the government and the administration of justice."

Rodino added that he had written acting Attorney General Robert H. Bork asking for "immediate assurance" that Cox's files will be preserved. Responsibility for the Watergate investigation has now reverted to the Justice Department's criminal division.

House Republican leaders also held a morning meeting and announced only that they had no objection to the Democratic plan to refer impeachment resolutions to Judiciary.

When the House met at noon it erupted in an hour-long series of brief speeches, mostly by Democrats calling for impeachment of the President.

Thirty-one members joined in introducing resolutions calling for impeachment, while 76 others cosponsored resolutions asking for an investigation without pre-judging the question of whether the President should be removed.

Rep. Dan Kuykendall (R-Tenn.) held up a hangman's

noose and urged the House not to become a "legislative lynch mob" as he said it did more than 100 years ago when it voted to impeach President Andrew Johnson in the struggles of the post-Civil War years.

Rep. Thomas Ashley (D-Ohio) said it was his great-grandfather who introduced the resolution to impeach Johnson, and said that the Senate trial failed "as it should have because it was undertaken for purely partisan political reasons." That could not be said of the resolutions to impeach Mr. Nixon, Ashley said, and he introduced one.

The announcement that Mr. Nixon had agreed to give up the tapes to District Court John J. Sirica brought a great sigh of relief from Republicans.

Said Ford, the Vice President-designate, in Harrisburg, Pa., for a fund-raising dinner: "This should, under any and all circumstances, wipe out any semblance of justification for any action in the House" on impeachment.



Photos by James K. W. Atherton—The Washington Post

Speaker Albert, left, and Judiciary Committee chairman Rodino after panel meeting.

—“It pulls the rug right out from under the impeachment effort,” said Rep. John J. Rhodes (R-Ariz.) who is expected to succeed Ford as House Republican leader. “The only chance they had was the President’s refusal to obey a court order.”

Rep. Edward Boland (D-Mass.), who had shared an apartment with O’Neill here for years, broke from the Democrats’ line, saying, “I think this cripples the im-

peachment move, unless he has crippled the tapes.”

On the other hand, Rep. Barber Conable (R-N.Y.), chairman of the House GOP research committee, said he thought the President’s action would “not have much effect” on the move to start impeachment proceedings. “I think it is entirely appropriate to have some investigation,” said Conable.

The Senate Judiciary Committee meets in closed session today and is expected to approve an inquiry into the weekend’s events.

Senate Democrats insisted that a new special prosecutor, independent of both Congress and the executive branch, is needed to carry on Cox’s work. The Cox firing and the dismantling of his office leaves the President as the sole investigator of accusations against his own administration, they said.

This view was expressed by such Democrats as Philip A. Hart (Mich.), Edward M. Kennedy (Mass.), Birch Bayh (Ind.), Walter F. Mondale (Minn.), John V. Tunney (Calif.) and Alan Cranston (Calif.).

Democratic Whip Robert C. Byrd (W.Va.) said he will vote for creating an independent prosecutor because “I don’t think we can expect anybody in the Justice Department to conduct a thorough, objective, fearless investigation.”

Staff writer Spencer Rich also contributed to this report.