

Nixon Buys a Little Time

by James Reston

Washington

THE ONE THING you have to say for Richard Nixon is that he knows when he is licked. Almost everything he always said he would never do—compromise with Moscow, recognize Peking, accept deficit financing, or be unfaithful to his promises—he has done. And he has done it again by agreeing to release the Watergate tapes, which he said he would never release.

It was a clever move. He has retreated from one mess to another, but he has gained time. It will take weeks to get the tapes down on paper and to get a new team to take over the prosecution at the

Justice Department, but meanwhile, he has got rid of Archibald Cox, the "independent" prosecutor, which was probably his objective, and he has postponed — though he has not avoided — a critical battle with both the courts and the Congress.

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THE PRESIDENT was in terrible trouble before he switched and agreed to let the tapes go to the courts. He judged Archibald Cox well enough. He gave Cox a dishonorable order he knew Cox wouldn't accept, and he was right. So Cox, for the moment, is going home.

But the President misjudged Attorney General

Richardson, and Deputy Attorney General Ruckelshaus. He appealed to Richardson to concentrate on the Middle East crisis, and stay on even if Cox disappeared. He even had Richardson's old friend Henry Kissinger appeal to Richardson to stress foreign crisis and avoid a resignation, but Richardson didn't agree.

Richardson appealed to the President's aides and lawyers to consider what the reaction would be in Congress and in the country if they fired Cox for carrying out the independent prosecution he was promised by the President and the Attorney General, but his appeals were rejected, even after he implied that he would have to resign if they insisted.

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IT WAS A typical, bold, and desperate Nixon play, but this time it didn't work. Public reaction went against the President. Cox, Richardson and Ruckelshaus went on television and stated their arguments, all of them, and particularly Richardson, with devastating effect.

Accordingly, the President was confronted with precisely the power struggle he had sought to avoid. The Congress was proceeding toward impeachment proceedings in the House, and the indications were that Judge Sirica was going to hold the President in contempt of court.

Facing all this, and the prospect that the controversy would go back into the streets if he defied the courts and the Congress, the President agreed to hand over the tapes. This will avoid the clash for a time but not for long.

For once he has admitted the tapes to evidence in the courts, it will be hard for him to exclude other relevant documents, or to argue against another special prosecutor. He has got rid of Cox for the moment, but not of prosecution. He has saved his skin, but not his honor.

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IRONICALLY, he chose to challenge in this latest of his political crises three men—Cox, Richardson and Ruckelshaus—who had become the most attractive and articulate symbols of objectivity and probity in his Administration. And in the process, he lost all three.

This has shocked Washington more than anything since the Watergate burglary, and while he now has time to try to sort things out, he has affronted his own most loyal supporters and even his own Cabinet, and raised the most serious questions about his moral authority to govern over the next three years.

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