

Dick Nolan

Impeachingly clear

If President Nixon has made one thing clear it is that he must be impeached before anything is made clear.

That includes the definition of "impeachment," which, among all the other things, seems to have become increasingly unclear as the great national scandals continue to unfold.

Impeachment is the formal laying of charges — in this case against Nixon — for full and fair trial before the Senate of the United States.

Yet you continually hear people saying, "Why should Nixon be impeached? Nobody's proved a thing!"

The charges come first. The proof, if any, follows. And the determination has only to do with whether or not the incumbent President is fit to hold that office.

I can't help feeling that an honest and honorable President would demand formal impeachment, in Nixon's circumstances, as an honest and honorable military man would demand a clear-cut court martial for the sake of his reputation.

On the face of it, impeachment proceedings ought not to be much of a gamble for Nixon. It's a cinch most of the Senate would be leaning over backwards for one reason or another to get this mess behind us with a minimum of civic uproar.

Instead, Nixon has been adding to the confusion with a quite deliberate campaign of obfuscation, looking to good old public relations engineering — again — to save his bacon.

To say that this course lacks dignity is to understate the case. For a man who talks so much about the eminence of the Presidency, as apart from the status of the man who happens to hold it, Nixon is behaving with a strange lack of merely ordinary good taste. He's the one who's undermining the Presidency, in a transparent drive to save a quite possibly undeserving President.

The charges against Nixon are serious. Not the least of them is that in defiance of our basic law he conducted secret military

operations on his own say-so, lied about them, and indeed proclaimed when cornered that he'd do it all over again. All this sounds more like Caesar Augustus than Richard Milhous, and in any case has little consonance with any customary understanding of the democratic American Constitution.

Watergate is something else and something additional: A cheap burglary, at base, in which he stands accused of complicity beforehand, and afterward of conspiracy to obstruct justice.

When it became clear, all those months ago, that John Dean was going to implicate Nixon in the Watergate skulduggery, the White House response was rather typical. It was orchestrated public relations again. There were taped conversations which were going to prove Dean a liar.

Since then we have had the shabby business of the magic tapes, which first disappeared and then never existed, although there was a Presidential memo, dictated afterward, detailing the Dean talks ... except that the dictation machine belt had also somehow disappeared or never existed.

While in Moscow the newspaper Pravda, of all press organs in the world, comes to Nixon's defense — in what must be the greatest turnabout in modern journalistic history — the PR campaign beats away on the theme of "national defense." Defense against whom? The Cambodian peasantry? Certainly not the noble Soviets, you have to assume.

It has all become far too muddied, and too much of the mud is being deliberately applied by the Nixon advertising staff.

From the standpoint of plain journalism, the story has dragged out too long and grown too complex. The press has done its job as a constituted arm of our democratic system, and done it well, if somewhat belatedly. Now the other American institutions must function: The Congress and the courts have to prove that they're still working effectively.

It's impeachment time, all right. It's the fairest course for all of us, including the accused President.