



What If Nixon Hangs in There?

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WATERGATE goes into the crunch once again this week. The President is talking defiantly of hanging in there all the way.

But the toll taken by an all-out fight — on Mr. Nixon himself, on his present associates in government, on the Republican Party and on the country — would be terrific. So if Mr. Nixon cannot lance the abscess quickly, it seems highly doubtful that he can tough it out for three full years.

The present White House tactic is to stampede the Congress into a quick up-or-down vote on impeachment. Hence the drumfire of White House statements about Mr. Nixon's determination all week long.

The State of the Union address, set for tomorrow, shapes up as a hard-line provocation — a challenge to the Democrats in the Congress. Given the self-righteousness of some of the extreme liberals on the House Judiciary Committee, that tactic just might work.

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BUT THE majority leader of the House, the broad-shouldered Tip O'Neill, is holding the extreme liberals back from a rush to judgment. The chairman of the Judiciary Committee, Peter Rodino, is moving slowly. Other senior Democrats, including Speaker Carl Albert and chairman Wilbur Mills of the Ways and Means Committee, have pointed out that the evidence isn't in yet. So the odds are that the Congress will handle the impeachment issue as it handles everything else — in a deliberate fashion.

A thorough airing of the charges against Mr. Nixon is apt to be devastating. Already any number of illegal acts — tax fraud, wiretapping, obstruction of justice through an erasure of a tape, illegal

contributions, attempted use of the CIA to cover up the Watergate investigation — seem to have originated in the Oval office.

Further investigation by competent lawyers armed with full subpoena powers, which Rodino now seems certain to obtain for his committee, is likely to turn up more dirt. Savvy officials here are betting that direct evidence of criminal action by Mr. Nixon is going to emerge.

Mr. Nixon's troubles, if he hangs in, are bound to overwhelm his closest associates. Gerald Ford, like other Vice Presidents, has recently found out how much he is tied to his President. He has felt obliged — against the advice of his staff, apparently — to make public statements exculpating Mr. Nixon and blaming others.

The decline of Ford is bound to affect Republican hopes adversely. Everybody acknowledges that the GOP will suffer terribly if Watergate is still alive by the 1974 congressional elections.

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AS FOR the country, the immediate danger is that Mr. Nixon will manipulate national issues to try to restore fading popularity. The energy problem is already a case in point. It is evident that the country is flapping around because Mr. Nixon is unprepared to take on hard decisions.

What all this says is that the cost of hanging tough on Watergate would be at least as heavy as the cost of an impeachment. No doubt the President is, as he put it, "going to fight like hell" against Watergate for the time being. But will he fight forever? At some point, when an impeachment shapes up, and maybe a prosecution, won't he develop a political illness?