

Keeping the White House at Arm's Length

Key Republican members of the House Judiciary Committee have sent this secret message to President Nixon: they will have no contact with him until impeachment proceedings are completed, a potentially ominous signal from the President's own party.

The message, quietly sent to the Oval Office after a caucus of the committee's Republican members just before Christmas, is being taken with deadly seriousness. One thoughtful Republican on the committee has informed his wife to expect a good long wait before fraternizing at any White House social functions.

Partly behind this symbolic and temporary divorce from the Nixon White House by Republicans on the impeachment committee are naive efforts by the White House to butter up the congressmen who are going to be sitting in judgment.

One is Rep. Hamilton Fish, a Republican junior member of the committee from upstate New York. He found himself conspicuously invited to a White House bill-signing ceremony for the first time during five long years in the House. The bill, unimportant compared to other bills the congressman has had a role in, dealt with the 1976 bicentennial.

Another Republican committee member was crudely sounded out by the Republican Party chairman of his state, obviously on orders from the Republican National Committee, to find out how he was going to vote. He was outraged by the question.

Whether this arm's-length gap between the committee's 17 Republicans and the President widens is going to depend heavily on whether the White House decides to cooperate—or do battle with—the impeachment committee. The Republicans, headed by Rep. Edward Hutchinson of Michigan, are sending this private warning to the Oval Office: remember, Mr. President, this committee could either be an agent of impeachment or an agent of "exoneration."

Some presidential aides believe Mr. Nixon is well aware that his conduct toward the impeachment committee, as the legal body responsible for starting the constitutional impeachment process, must at least appear to be beyond reproach.

In contrast to the Senate Watergate Committee established to investigate alleged illegalities arising from the June 1972 breaking and entering of the Democratic National Committee offices, the House Judiciary Committee has what one presidential aide calls "a

constitutional burden." While saying nothing publicly about how the President will deal with the committee, White House aides concede this discretion is bound to have some impact on the President.

Yet, no White House guidelines are yet discernible, nor are they likely to be until the White House has answers to some of these questions: precisely how does the committee define an impeachable offense? How does the committee plan to use and safeguard information demanded from the White House? Can the committee guarantee the confidentiality of documents and other materials it gets from the administration?

As for the total break in communications between committee Republicans and the President, presidential advisers seem content with the channel proposed by Hutchinson: all contact between the Republicans and the White House will be handled by the committee's minority counsel, Albert Jenner, and Mr. Nixon's special counsel, James St. Clair.

Yet, the quick decision by the Republicans to break off contact with the White House reflects deep strains within the party over the impeachment issue. Facing congressional election only nine months hence, there is not a

Republican member of Congress running for re-election not terrified that the political fallout of Watergate may gravely taint his campaign.

In short, it is the Republicans, not the Democrats, who stand to gain most well before the campaign starts. The Republicans would then be running under the banner of Gerald Ford and in a political climate closer to presidential honeymoon than Watergate.

The impeachment committee Republicans, lawyers to a man, do not publicly discuss such apostasy. Instead, they talk of the committee's constitutional prerogatives, of the need for full presidential cooperation with what one calls their "decorous" impeachment proceedings.

Thus, if the President means to extend his "fight like hell" pledge to the House Judiciary Committee, he risks massive defections among Republicans who otherwise might find sound reasons for voting against articles of impeachment. If one thing about the move to impeach Mr. Nixon is perfectly clear, it is that impeachment is more a political process than a criminal prosecution. Intent to cooperate, not intent to resist, could turn out to be President Nixon's best defense.