



The Struggle for Tapes, Documents

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LAST MONDAY, a hidden drama began between the White House and the House Judiciary Committee, which must now sit in judgement on Richard M. Nixon. At the President's Monday night press conference, the drama was reflected — as in a mirror — by the President's enigmatically qualified avowal of eagerness to cooperate with the House Committee.

Yet this hidden drama has such potential impact on the future that it may be useful to recount what has happened to date.

On Monday, then, the House Judiciary Committee sent the White House its first written request for material from the files needed for its inquiry into the President's impeachment. It is still impossible to determine the exact scope of the committee's request.

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THE COMMITTEE chairman, Representative Peter Rodino of New Jersey, has reportedly explained to colleagues that the committee has asked for an itemized list of tapes and documents that had already been handed over to special prosecutor Leon Jaworski.

At the Wednesday White House meeting with the Republican leaders in Congress, meanwhile, members of the President's staff seemed to be suggesting a vastly wider committee request. A demand for some sort of access for the committee to the total index of all White House files was the kind of thing sketched to the Republican congressional leaders.

One of the congressional Republicans then suggested to the presidential staff

members that the White House voluntarily turn over to the House committee all material already given to special prosecutor Jaworski. This was met with objections.

It is plain that the White House is at least extremely hesitant to give the House Judiciary Committee the kind of thing that Chairman Rodino has been saying that the committee has now asked for. Add that special prosecutor Jaworski is known to have turned over to the committee's Democratic counsel, John Doar, a list of all the tapes and documents the special prosecutor's office has thus far obtained by successive requests to the White House.

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YOU MUST conclude from all the foregoing that the drama is hidden at moment, primarily because it is a drama being enacted within the White House itself. Behind those tight-closed doors, one cannot discern the names and numbers of the principal actors. Is the President having one of his fits of angry obstinacy, to which he has regularly given way before yielding up papers or tapes?

Or is the President's new lawyer, James D. St. Clair, strongly advising the President to limit his openness with the House Judiciary Committee? One cannot possibly tell.

However, negative White House responses to reasonable-seeming committee requests will make a House majority for a bill of impeachment very much more likely than it is today — when it is still unlikely.