

Drama Behind the Scenes

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

They may be dragging the bodies offstage and ringing down the curtain before these words see print. Yet this hidden drama has such potential impact on the future that it may be useful to recount what has happened to date—even though the reader may well know the denouement, whereas this reporter does not know it.

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. Precisely because the drama is still hidden at this writing, it is still impossible to determine the exact scope of the committee's request.

The committee chairman, Rep. Peter Rodino of New Jersey, has reportedly explained to colleagues that the committee has chiefly asked for an itemized list of tapes and documents that had already been handed over to Special Prosecutor Leon Jaworski. Published accounts have spoken of 17 tape recordings and 700 pages of documents, which would be consistent with the Rodino explanation.

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, of the dragnet type that more or less cooked the goose of Sam Dash, the ambitious counsel of the Senate Watergate Committee. 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 the objections that it was necessary to consider the rights of individuals potentially under indictment, and that Jaworski's wishes also had to be respected.

Hence 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.

You must conclude from all the foregoing that the drama is hidden at the moment, primarily because it is a drama being enacted within the White House itself. Behind those tightly 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. There are no signs to go by, as yet, except the slowness of response to the committee's letter, plus the ominous hints at the Wednesday leaders' meeting at the White House.

Yet there are some things one can tell. To begin with, despite the left-wing bias of many of the Judiciary Committee members, Chairman Rodino has handled his problem, at least so far, in a way that has pleased most members of the House. He may be the very opposite of impartial, as some of presidential loyalists charge. But he has managed to look fairly impartial.

Secondly, the committee's Democratic special counsel, John Doar, has also made a good impression in the House. This is not just because of his quiet manner and obvious intelligence. There is also the key fact that Doar has studiously avoided the kind of grand-standing, semi-public Watergate-

leaking, and general prosecutorial flim-flam that marked the performance of Senate committee counsel Dash.

These are all facts of utmost importance to the President and his advisers. They mean that if counsel Doar and Chairman Rodino keep their requests for information within the bounds of what seems reasonable, the great majority of House members will tend to feel that the White House should respond positively to those requests. If the White House response is negative, moreover, there will be rather general House support for subpoenas served on the White House.

In sum, 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.

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