

By William Greider
Washington Post Staff Writer

Historians will note that the formal process began on May 9, a gray day when light spring rain dampened the capital city and an ominous political thunder threatened the presidency of Richard M. Nixon.

The ceremonial beginning lacked dramatic substance. The House Committee on the Judiciary, 38 men and women, all lawyers, started their investigation of the President with an appropriate medley of public solemnities. But their genuine work began in private session, their first serious consideration of the evidence for impeachment.

That formal hearing made the day historic, yet it was upstaged by an intangible drama unfolding in Washington, a gathering atmosphere of crisis for the embattled President. Old political friends obliquely ex-

pressed their own pessimism about his future. Other long-standing allies reluctantly urged him to give up the fight now and spare the nation the constitutional agony that lies ahead.

"This is a very tough column for me to write," publisher William Randolph Hearst Jr. began, "but events this week make it imperative. The essence—or lead, as we say in the newspaper business—is that President Nixon has made it impossible for me to continue believing what he claims about himself in the Watergate mess."

The Hearst newspaper chain was among the most loyal to Mr. Nixon. Now its editor-in-chief wants him to resign.

So does the Omaha World-Herald, another stalwart

See PROCESS, A9, Col. 1

PROCESS, From A1

that endorsed the man in all three of his presidential campaigns.

So does the Chicago Tribune, the traditional voice of Midwestern Republicanism. The Tribune played a pivotal role in the nation's only other presidential impeachment when it reluctantly concluded in 1868 that President Andrew Johnson's tenure must end.

Republican politicians were less direct about it, but if you read their statements between the lines the way Washington usually does, the message was even more menacing to Mr. Nixon's future. Rep. John Anderson, chairman of the House Republican Conference, announced that the country would benefit from a speedy resignation, a heretical pronouncement that would have been denounced as party treason a few short weeks ago.

Rep. John Rhodes, the Republican floor leader in the House, was less direct, yet more shocking because of his prominence. His suggestion was that the President should start thinking about resignation.

And Rhodes' statement was eclipsed by Vice President Gerald Ford, the man who will ascend to the highest office in the land if Mr. Nixon steps aside or is removed.

Ford attacked the White House's handling of the celebrated Oval Office tape recordings, which are the most intriguing evidence in the case. Ford's speech did not include his usual disclaimer on the President's innocence, an omission that seems more ominous than anything he said.

The rank atmosphere of White House cynicism conveyed by the tape transcripts deepens public distrust of all government, Ford told an Illinois audience. "That is why I am speaking frankly on the subject, perhaps more so than some of my colleagues might wish."

At the White House end of Pennsylvania Avenue, however, the President's public spokesmen were pretending that none of these matters had any significance. The President, they said, was busy yesterday being President. He met with congressional leaders for two hours to discuss the economy. He met with the National Commission for Industrial Peace. He met with some veterans. He met with a group of citizens from Monroe, La., who declared their continuing support for him.

"Let me restate what I thought I made clear yesterday," said Gerald L. Warren, the President's deputy press secretary. "The President has every intention to complete the work of his administration."

Those confident statements notwithstanding, the widespread feeling in Washington, as the House committee formally began its deliberations, was that Mr. Nixon's boldest gamble had backfired. The public release last week of the 1,254-page transcript of White House conversations on Watergate produced a general revulsion, not just

among his liberal enemies, but also among his conservative friends.

James J. Kilpatrick, the conservative columnist, told a Stanford, Calif., audience: "The terrible dismayed truth was that my President emerges from these pages like the image of all the shabby second-rate PR men who swarm around Washington. The shabby little press agents who don't make it to the first rank, who area always promoting, and this was my President."

Thus, while the edited transcripts leave the House Judiciary Committee with a variety of arguable questions on whether Mr. Nixon is guilty of this or that, the rough tone of these private conversations seems to have dent's public case rather than helped it, as he and his aides had predicted.

Under the TV kleig lights, the Judiciary Committee members assembled with a studied decorum, pretending that none of those reverberations would affect their deliberations on the evidence. The nation got its first thorough introduction to this group yesterday via a brief live broadcast on network TV of the committee's opening formalities.

The committee's emphasis on creating an aura of sober and judicious inquiry is profoundly different from the only other precedent in American history, the 1868 impeachment of Johnson. Then, radical Republicans who dominated the House Judiciary Committee were so zealous for impeachment that they dug up all sorts of unsubstantiated and slanderous gossip to bolster their case.

Conscious of that bitter 1868 trauma, the Democratic leadership this time has been eager to create a different atmosphere—detached and orderly. They insist on proceeding in their regular committee room, a chamber with pale green walls and a mammoth federal eagle on the wall, staring down at the curved dais where the members sit. The room is far too small to permit much public attendance, once half the seats are taken by news people and the other half by friends and associates of the 38 committee members.

The Jersey accent of Chairman Peter W. Rodino, a Democrat from Newark, yielded politely to the flat Midwestern twang of Rep. Edward Hutchinson from St. Joseph, Mich., the ranking Republican.

"I don't need to stress again the importance of our undertaking and the wisdom, decency and principle which we must bring to it," said Rodino. "We understand our high constitutional responsibility."

Hutchinson was equally grave. "In view of the enormity of the responsibility cast upon us," he said, "I trust that in the days and weeks ahead each of us will, according to the dictates of his own conscience, seek the guidance of the Divine Providence which can be with us all and be everywhere for good, and which has so blessed this nation and its people throughout our history."

The President's lawyer,

James D. St. Clair, and two of St. Clair's aides were also present and in an agreeable mood. "To listen and observe—period," St. Clair explained.

St. Clair offered reporters the confident prediction of an experienced trial lawyer: "The President will not be impeached. The House of Representatives will not impeach."

The chairman yielded to the mellifluous Boston Irish accent of Rep. Harold D. Donohue, a former trolley-car conductor who, at 72, is the oldest committee member. Donohue never says much in public, but yesterday he read aloud the motion to close the initial meetings because the evidence "may tend to defame, degrade or incriminate."

A few other Democrats spoke briefly against closed meetings, but the squabble wasn't serious. The members voted, 31 to 6, to comply with their chairman's wishes. Then the reporters and other spectators were excused and the committee members began listening to their chief counsel, John Doar, in private.

The case will be heard by an assembly of unfamous people, who are perhaps slightly more liberal in composition than the House of Representatives as a whole, but generally typical of the men and women who get elected to Congress.

A couple of former prosecutors, a former state attorney general, a law professor and priest, a judge and four former FBI men. Three of them are blacks, two are women.

None of them, according to the curbstone estimates of contemporary Washington, is a giant of American history. Yet history is touching them and they seem to feel its weight.

Are they detached grand jurors sifting through the evidence for indictment? Or are they politicians listening to that thunder of public opinion outside the committee room?

The general assumption is that they are both. Of those 38 people are remembered at all in history, it will be for the way they answer those questions in the weeks ahead.

Bolling tried to get a recorded vote on whether there should be a secret ballot, but a "misunderstanding" by Caucus chairman Olin Teague (D-Tex.) and a House parliamentarian moved the proceedings along to a vote on the resolution.

House Republican Conference chairman John Anderson (Ill.) blasted the Democrats for killing the reforms and promised that Republicans would make a campaign issue of the matter.

"A great majority of Republicans recognize the loss of confidence not only in the President but in the Congress," he said, and "these basic reforms were needed to restore that confidence. It's evident it was the Democratic party that killed those reforms and that they are not the party of reform in Congress."

Republican leaders had endorsed the reforms, which benefited the minority party by insuring them one-third of the committee staffs.