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WXP Post

JUN 23 1974

The Impeachment Tide

The impeachment current abated slightly as the House Judiciary Committee ended its general review of the evidence last week. But as so often in the past when the Watergate tide seemed to ebb, a new flood of troubles for the President is making up—this time in the Supreme Court. Moreover, there is now beginning to come home the awful price the country will have to pay if Mr. Nixon is not pushed from office.

The impeachment pace has so far been set by the impartial, deliberately balanced presentation of evidence by the Judiciary Committee's chief counsel, John Doar. In the absence of any clear lead from Mr. Doar, impatient Democrats ordered up from the staff special analyses which presented the case against the President more decisively. Those devastating statements were then leaked.

The White House immediately cried "character assassination," and amplified that grievance through the grapevine of resentful Nixonites throughout the country.

Republicans on the Judiciary Committee, also left in the dark by Doar, were particularly vulnerable to the Nixonite claque. So the week ended with everybody on the committee feeling that the hearings needed more direction.

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In the next few weeks, Doar is almost certain to begin summing up the case in a more sharply pointed way. One sure sign is that Richard Cates, a well-known trial lawyer from Madison, Wis., who has steeped himself in the Watergate cover-up, will be returning to the staff in July after a month's leave of absence.

Moreover, a dark shadow against Mr. Nixon's defense is already being cast by the Supreme Court. The court has agreed to consider the merits of a subpoena by Special Watergate Prosecutor Leon Jaworski for tapes of 64 conversations which the White House has so far not turned over.

Indications are that at least a score of these tapes are extremely damaging to the President. Mr. Nixon had a chance to avoid the Supreme Court test by turning over a limited number of the tapes to Mr. Jaworski last month. After a two-day negotiation, the President's lawyers refused to make a deal with the Special Prosecu-

tor. The White House almost certainly listened to the tapes during that negotiating period, and decided to risk the confrontation with the Supreme Court rather than to cough up even the minimum number of tapes stipulated in the Jaworski offer.

The nearly universal impression here in Washington is that the Supreme Court is going to decide against the President on the tapes. If Mr. Nixon defied the court, he would be impeached without further ado. His position will not be much better if he turns over the tapes to the Special Prosecutor, but then defies the impeachment inquiry.

The President's hope, of course, is that dramatic events—notably the trips to the Middle East and Russia—will make the impeachment question seem like a trivial nitpicking quarrel with a man whose real business is running the world. Only it isn't working that way at all.

The events that really matter are not going well. Inflation continues high. The economy, far from picking up, seems headed toward unemployment of over 6 per cent at the end of the year. Less and less is being done about such problems as pollution, poverty, tax reform and dozens of social troubles.

The reason for this inaction is the severe partisanship which now pervades Washington. And why the partisanship? Because the President has rested his defense on a narrow quarter of the electorate, on the Nixonites who support him no matter what. That quintessentially partisan tactic by the President only stimulates the partisanship of the Democrats.

The upshot is that none of the problems troubling the country can be solved while Mr. Nixon is on the impeachment rack. Nor would it help if the House did not impeach him.

For the heart of our cohesion as a country—the reason we have been able to govern ourselves and maintain a workable economy and a degree of law and order, not to mention a modicum of peace in the world—is that most of us play by the rules. But to let Mr. Nixon off, the country would be declaring as official doctrine that anything goes in the United States, that playing the game by the rules doesn't count.