

SFChronicle
Warning Signs in Congress

Gathering Impeach Storm

Washington

Partisan fissures that split the House Judiciary Committee last week and culminated in a White House call for the committee chairman's ouster were described Saturday as the warning signs of a coming political eruption in congress over impeachment.

"Things have gotten out of hand," said a Republican member of the Judiciary Committee, "and I'm afraid they're going to get worse."

"The honeymoon is over," agreed a Democrat on the panel in an assessment of the apparent collapse, after seven months of tissue-thin bipartisan facade. "We're being attacked both frontally and from the flank."

Four days ago the committee argued bitterly over the refusal of Democrats to summon immediately all the witnesses recommended to the impeachment inquiry by the White House. Three days ago the panel wrangled over the form of rebuttal evidence offered by President Nixon's defense attorney.

Friday the rancor spilled onto the House floor as a consequence of a published report that the chairman, Representative Peter W. Rodino Jr. (Dem-N.J.) had estimated that all 21 of the committee's Democrats would support a recommendation that Mr. Nixon be impeached.

According to well-placed Democratic and Republican officials of the House, the following political factors are likely to influence the tone and conduct of the final stages of House impeachment proceedings:

- Efforts by senior House Republicans to persuade colleagues, including some on the Judiciary Committee, that some step short of im-



KEN W. CLAWSON
 'Witch-hunt'

peachment — such as a vote to censure the President — would be sufficient to deal with Watergate and related scandals without jeopardizing the Republican congressmen's own political futures.

- Pressure by House Democratic leaders for acceleration of the committee inquiry to meet a schedule calling for a House vote on impeachment around August 23, thus satisfying apparent public desires to resolve the issue without further delay.

- White House attempts to discredit the committee's eventual findings by characterizing them as the product of what Nixon aide Ken W. Clawson described Friday night as a partisan "witch-hunt." Clawson is director of communications for the executive branch.

One indication of the nature of the developing political struggle over Mr. Nixon's future was a series of reports that conservative Republicans in congress had begun discussing a possible vote to censure the President as an alternative to a formal impeachment vote in the House and trial by the

Senate.

A Republican conservative from the Middle West said in an interview that he had participated in three separate discussions of a possible censure vote.

A Republican member of the Judiciary Committee, who is considered undecided on the impeachment issue, said that several conservative colleagues had discussed informally with him whether a vote to censure Mr. Nixon would be sufficient to resolve questions about the President's conduct.

Such a suggestion could have significant bearing on the impeachment debate. Rodino has said, and most congressional officials have echoed, that the Judiciary Committee's recommendation would be most influential on the House floor if supported by some Republicans.

Should the seven or eight undecided Republicans on the panel favor a censure

vote rather than impeachment, in the belief that such a vote would express distaste for activities of the Nixon Administration but would avoid a commitment to a proceeding that could lead to the President's removal from office, the prospects for impeachment would be diminished considerably.

The House Republican leader, Representative John J. Rhodes of Arizona, told an interviewer that he was familiar with discussion of a possible censure motion but that, in his view, it would be "exactly the wrong thing to do."

"What we are trying to do," Rhodes said, "is to strengthen the Presidency one way or another, not weaken it. To censure the President and leave him in office would be doing the country a grave disservice. It would completely cripple the man and would be giving him the worst of two worlds."

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