



The Republicans And Impeachment

— Joseph Kraft

“ONE OF these days the Republicans are going to wake up and find they’ve got a bullet to eat for breakfast.” That comment — made months ago by Jack Brooks, a senior Democrat on the House Judiciary Committee — described exactly what happened in the impeachment proceedings last week. Republicans on the committee suddenly found themselves facing up to an agonizing choice. While the outcome was uncertain as the week ended, it seemed quite clear that the President would not be able to line up a solid front of Republicans against impeachment.

The lull which ended last week was largely the work of the chief counsel for the Judiciary Committee, John Doar. For the previous month Doar had been laying out the evidence.

★ ★ ★

IN KEEPING with the wishes of committee chairman Peter Rodino, Doar presented the evidence in a colorless, toneless, odorless fashion. The aim was to baffle administration charges of partisan bias. Doar did the job so well that most of the committee were stupefied — even anesthetized.

With the Democratic leadership not pressing the impeachment case, the President and his aides had a clear shot at organizing a united Republican stand against impeachment. Several times there seemed to be GOP agreement on such procedural matters as the calling of wit-

nesses and the deplorable nature of leaks to the press.

But in the background, day after day developments kept shaping attitudes. For one thing the President refused to comply with repeated committee subpoenas for tapes of his White House conversations.

For another thing, Mr. Nixon’s closest associates went down in guilty verdicts, guilty pleas or evasive testimony. The cumulative effect of these events was to cast severe doubt on Mr. Nixon himself.

★ ★ ★

EFFORTS by the President’s counsel, James St. Clair, to meet these substantive doubts only made matters worse. One of the witnesses summoned by St. Clair — the President’s former chief of staff H.R. Haldeman — did not take the stand because he indicated in advance he would use the Fifth Amendment protection against testimony that might be self-incriminating.

At the moment the biggest question mark is the Supreme Court. A decision early this week might give the Republicans a procedural issue around which they can build a unanimous stand. But failing that, my guess is that the Judiciary Committee, by the end of the week, will cast a solid vote for impeachment with enough Republicans deserting the President on a strong enough charge to carry the case through the House and on to the Senate.