

The Nixon Administration enters the New Year under siege from four different lines of attack.

The special prosecutor's office organized by Archibald Cox is persevering relentlessly (under leadership of its new chief, Leon Jaworski) in its inquiries into possible Administration malfeasance. According to Mr. Jaworski, major indictments against former Administration officials are likely to be forthcoming from one of three grand juries before the month is out.

The Senate Watergate committee has subpoenaed the tapes of nearly 500 White House conversations. The subpoena is returnable tomorrow, but the date is negotiable if the White House cannot cope with the entire request immediately.

The House Judiciary Committee has meanwhile begun to prepare itself for a decision on the impeachment question. It is not yet clear whether the staff under its new special counsel, John Doar, intends to pursue investigative leads of its own or concentrate on collating material already gathered by the special prosecutor and Senate Watergate committee. Representative Rodino of New Jersey, committee chairman, has set an informal March deadline for a committee decision.

Finally, leading newspapers and magazines have investigative reporters at work pursuing various leads concerning possible misconduct by the Administration. For the press to do less would be irresponsible. The disclosures of the last eighteen months have been astonishing. So many improbable stories about this Administration have proved true that now every allegation has to be checked out.

With his own conduct and his own Administration under active investigation by the special prosecutor, the Senate Watergate committee, the House Judiciary committee and the press, Mr. Nixon walks a narrowing road into the future. He can scarcely concentrate on the Middle East, the energy shortage and other crises or even the routine business of Government since Watergate rises in so many different shapes to haunt him. He is not so much leading a Government as conducting a legal defense.

This unprecedented situation places a rare strain on Vice President Gerald Ford. As a recipient of Mr. Nixon's favor and as a loyal partisan, Mr. Ford may naturally feel impelled to defend his chief at every turn. His highest duty, however, is not to Mr. Nixon but to the American people whose chief executive he may soon become.

The situation places an even greater strain on Congress and the people. How much longer can America afford to allow public business to drift largely unattended while its President looks first to his own legal safety? This anomalous condition cannot long continue. The need for a decision on the fate of the President grows daily more imperative.