

White House: A New Storm Gathering?

Two recent acts of breathtaking ineptitude by President Nixon's foes have strengthened the hand of hard-line staffers inside the White House and thereby increased the possibility of a political bloodbath in the coming months.

Those two events, playing a subpoenaed White House tape recording at a Georgetown cocktail party here and the shotgun subpoenaing of White House files by the Senate Watergate Committee, provide needed ammunition for Nixon hard-liners in the continuing internal dispute. Within recent weeks, there have been strong signs of Mr. Nixon's returning to the hard line where he feels most comfortable.

The issue could be decided in current San Clemente discussions. If the hard-liners win, Mr. Nixon will cease all efforts at conciliation and, instead, subject every critic to massive political retaliation. Though its effectiveness is questionable, that strategy could totally brutalize American politics in 1974.

As we have often reported, several presidential aides disagreed with concessions by Mr. Nixon (including casting off his chief lieutenants, H. R. Haldeman and John D. Ehrlichman) last spring when the Watergate scandal broke. Since then, the President has moved reluctantly toward ever greater concessions while sporadically returning to the hard line. "I ask you: What good has it done him?" Demands a hard-line aide.

After promising total disclosure during "Operation Candor," the President three weeks ago seemed on the verge of releasing to the public comprehensive summaries of the tapes. For example, speechwriter Patrick Buchanan, usually a hard-nose conservative, argued such disclosure would do Mr. Nixon more good than harm.

The event that turned the tide was the Georgetown cocktail incident where William Dobrovir, a Ralph Nader lawyer, played a subpoenaed tape as a party stunt. Even hard-line presidential aides privately admit that Dobrovir's bizarre conduct is substantively irrelevant. But it has made all the difference in internal White House politics.

The Dobrovir incident, the hard-liners have argued inside the White House, shows the undisciplined state of the liberals and reveals why they are so vulnerable to sustained counter-attack. Moreover, it provides mighty good ammunition for retreating from "Operation Candor."

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Coupled with the Dobrovir incident is the blunder by Sen. Sam Ervin of North Carolina, chairman of the Senate Watergate Committee, in approving his staff's shotgun subpoenas for over 500 tape recordings and documents—a move criticized even by key Democrats. Here again, cry the hard-liners, is proof of indiscipline, stupidity and vulnerability of the liberals. Here again, they add, is a reason to justify an end to "Operation Candor" on grounds that the liberals take a mile when you give them an inch.

The two incidents enhanced the basic argument inside the White House against releasing the tape summaries: Just as it did with Mr. Nixon's

personal tax statement, the hostile media would emphasize new material derogatory to the President and play down evidence exonerating him.

So, on Dec. 28, the White House acknowledged it would not release the summaries (with the present intention to release merely a "white paper" describing them).

Moreover, the White House mood now is to use the Dobrovir and Ervin incidents to deny all tapes to the Senate committee while making them available to the House Judiciary Committee's impeachment proceedings. Some Nixon men regard the House committee under Rep. Peter Rodino of New Jersey as bulkier, less united and vastly more partisan than Ervin's and, therefore, a less formidable antagonist.

But the hard-liners now at San Clemente are seeking much more. They want a new posture by Mr. Nixon that will threaten every critic with the political fight of his life. Had this policy been in effect in 1973, Ervin's investigation would have earned him a brutal assault on his own ethics.

Taking a hard line, however, cannot stop the inexorable process now underway: grand jury indictments, trials and—most important—the House impeachment proceedings.

The hard-line advisers concede this. But they are convinced that Mr. Nixon will never be voted out of office by the Senate, will never resign and would prefer weathering the storm inside rather than outside the White House.

They know he will suffer grievous wounds in the process. But in San Clemente, they are now urging him to also inflict some in return and thereby reduce the number and ardor of his enemies ("We want a quartet instead of a choir against us," says one). If the President follows their counsel, the ugliest days of Watergate lie ahead.