



BY STEWART ALSOP

## 'I WOULD NOT WANT THE PRESIDENCY ON THOSE TERMS'

**WASHINGTON**—For those who enjoy imagining nightmares (and there are a good many of us), here is one to chill the blood:

All the spring and summer of 1973, and still deep into the autumn, the headlines and the television news shows are dominated by the Watergate affair. The affair becomes a three-ring circus, the main rings being the Sam Ervin show in the Senate, the investigations of the "special prosecutor" and the trials of those indicted by the grand jury. There are also plenty of side-shows, and new and sensational charges and countercharges appear almost daily.

As the complex, tedious, nauseating, fascinating and seemingly endless story unfolds, the President's standing in the polls and his prestige at home and abroad sink inexorably. Circumstantial evidence tends to involve the President directly in the scandal, and so does the testimony of men trying desperately to save their own skins. More and more people come to believe that the President himself was responsible both for the original intelligence and political-sabotage operation and for the attempt to cover it up. By autumn, the people who so believe constitute a decisive majority.

### THE MOTION

By autumn, what was only whispered in the spring is being advocated openly—impeachment. In late autumn, a move to impeach President Nixon for compounding a felony and for other high crimes and misdemeanors is made in the House. After bitter debate, the impeachment motion passes by a slim majority.

The scene now moves to the Senate. In accordance with the Constitution, it is transformed into a court, presided over by Chief Justice Warren Burger, to sit in judgment over the President. Again the debate is bitter, and this time prolonged. The trial vote is for conviction, by a majority—but a majority short of the necessary two-thirds. Richard M. Nixon is still President of the United States.

That is the nightmare, and for those who understand its meaning, it is about as nightmarish as it could be. Consider the past. In 1868, President Andrew Johnson was impeached, ostensibly for removing Secretary of War Edwin Stanton from office against the express wishes of Congress, in fact for attempt-

ing to follow President Lincoln's policy of reconciliation toward the South. The impeachment failed of conviction by one vote, and Johnson remained in office until the end of his term.

The era that followed is, except for the Civil War itself, the most tragic in American history. In the South, "Reconstruction" replaced reconciliation, the Southern states were treated as occupied enemy territory, and the Carpetbaggers, the Scalawags and the Ku Kluxers flourished. In the North, the robber barons rode high, and money corruption reached into the White House itself.

### AT THE LEAST

But at least when Andrew Johnson was impeached, he had only a few months left in office. Richard Nixon's term runs until noon, Jan. 20, 1977. At least when Andrew Johnson was impeached, the United States was a minor power, not much involved in the affairs of the world, protected by its oceanic moats. At least when Andrew Johnson was impeached, there were no inter-continental missiles, and no nuclear warheads.

These differences suggest why the notion of the impeachment of Richard Nixon is so nightmarish a nightmare. They also suggest why the odds still favor, not impeachment, but some other outcome—perhaps vindication for the President, perhaps an uncomfortable standoff, perhaps some now unforeseeable outcome agreed upon in advance.

For the nightmare is hardly less than a prescription for the decapitation of the United States, at a time of great danger. A President Nixon who had been impeached, and whose impeachment had failed of conviction by a narrow margin, would be no real President at all. He would be a powerless figurehead, robbed of all power to lead, left only the power to obstruct. And the impeachment and the Senate trial would leave this country divided more bitterly than at any time since the impeachment of Andrew Johnson failed by a single vote.

Given the scenario outlined above, what other outcome might be possible? In considering that question, it is worth recalling the story of the first few days after the hair's-breadth defeat of Richard Nixon by John F. Kennedy in 1960.

The election was on Tuesday, Nov. 8. After he had conceded to Kennedy,

Nixon flew from California to Washington, and then to Key Biscayne, with Mrs. Nixon and a little band of hardcore Nixonites—secretary Rose Mary Woods, Robert Finch, Herb Klein, Don Hughes, one or two others.

In Key Biscayne, he got a number of telephone calls from major supporters urging him to contest the election, on the ground that it had been stolen. More important, he got word from J. Edgar Hoover, an old ally, that the FBI had clear proof of massive vote stealing in Illinois, Texas and elsewhere.

According to his book "Six Crises," Nixon did not make the final decision not to contest the election until some days later, when he had returned to Washington. But one of those who was with him at Key Biscayne remembers his first, instinctive reaction. He might win the Presidency by demanding a recount, he said, but only at the price of chaos and bitterness, and "I would not want the Presidency on those terms." A few days later, he met with President-elect Kennedy and promised to lead "the loyal opposition."

### A CONSIDERATION

There are those—and in this respect the lady liberals seem especially venomous—who are quite convinced that Richard M. Nixon is not a human being at all, but the foul fiend himself, in vaguely human form. Such people will automatically dismiss the above episode as untrue, or if true, the outcome of a cold calculation of Nixon's self-interest. And yet it is possible that, in the situation that then confronted him, Nixon considered first the good of the country. It is possible that, in the situation that may soon confront him, he will again put that consideration first.

For the present, nothing is more certain than that the President is determined to fight for the Presidency, and for all the prestige and authority that go with the office, with everything he has. As he once remarked to this writer, "When I am attacked, my instinct is to strike back." He will strike back as hard as he knows how.

But suppose it becomes inescapably clear that the fight is lost, that he can hold the Presidency only as a discredited figurehead. In that case, it does not seem inconceivable that he might decide, as he decided once before, that "I would not want the Presidency on those terms."