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Wallowing in the Watergate Horror

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A SINGLE grim but highly practical question needs to be answered about the current wallowing in the Watergate horror. With what purpose are we wallowing? Securing the resignation or impeachment of the President, would seem to be the only rational answer.

As of today, however, the odds appear enormously high against this purpose ever being achieved. The President himself is known to be unshakably determined to ride out the horror without resigning his office. That leaves impeachment. And no one with any knowledge of the house and senate thinks there is any likelihood that the President will be impeached.

The house must vote to impeach before the senate can even debate the subject; and there was an interesting, little noticed test of house sentiment last week. Some time ago, representative Paul N. McCloskey of California requested an hour of the House's time to discuss impeachment. He was given the time on Wednesday — a day when it should have been easy to get a full house.

He got nothing of the sort. Only sixty members were on the floor when the right wing Republican, Representative Earl F. Landgrebe of Indiana, made the point of order and called for a quorum. Hardly more than a third of the members of the House responded to the quorum call. In the end, Representative McCloskey offered his own motion to adjourn, after putting his largely undelivered speech in the record.

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ON THE basis of this test, the most knowing leaders of the House now estimate that not more than about 50 house members — or hardly more than a tenth of the total — would now vote for the

President's impeachment.

That leaves a question, of course, about whether the sentiment in Congress will be radically changed in the next days and weeks, by additional testimony before the Senate's Watergate investigating committee. The answer appears to come in two parts.

To begin with, some forthcoming testimony has been heavily discounted in advance by the great majority of members of the House and Senate. In the key case of John Dean, for example, the apparent contradictions in the stories he has told have been carefully noted. So too have his frantic efforts to secure immunity from prosecution, at whatever cost. A general judgment of his character has been reached.

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THE CASE is different for men like H. R. Haldeman and former attorney general John Mitchell. They are not regarded as necessarily more virtuous. They are simply regarded as having far more weight. If that is these men's choice, they can deal the President potentially fatal blows. But to do so, even these men will have to go very far in their testimony.

It is urgent to have the answer about the President that the congressional leaders quite properly want. But if the answer leaves no practical room for impeachment, it is also urgent for the country to begin thinking about some other matters besides Watergate.

We badly need to think about the present galloping inflation; the currency's loss of value partly caused by Watergate; and other things that have great permanent importance. But while we wallow in the horror, we seem unable to think of anything else.