

The Harris Survey

Impeachment Gains Support On Tape Issue

By Louis Harris

By 51 to 34 per cent, a majority of the American people feels that "Congress would be justified to begin impeachment proceedings against President Nixon" if he refused a court order directing him to turn over Watergate tape recordings to a panel of judges.

The conclusion of a special, in-depth Harris Survey, conducted between Sept. 23 and 25 among 1,475 households nationwide, is that with the passage of time President Nixon is in deeper trouble over Watergate, rather than the issue receding in importance. The public, previously reluctant to contemplate impeachment of the President, now is actively considering this a real prospect.

Here are other highlights from the survey:

- By 47 to 39 per cent, a plurality of the public now believes that "if the U.S. Senate Watergate committee decides that President Nixon was involved in the Watergate cover-up," then "Congress should impeach him." A month earlier the public rejected impeachment even in the face of such charges by the Watergate committee, by 50 to 39 per cent. The latest results therefore indicate a sharp turnaround by the public on the impeachment issue.

- The American people simply do not buy Mr. Nixon's argument that executive privilege and separation of powers between the executive and other branches of the federal government justify his withholding the tapes. By a substantial 56 to 29 per cent, a majority thinks the President was "wrong to appeal the decision of Judge Sirica that he allow the judge to hear the tapes on Watergate." Although the normal judicial processes give Mr. Nixon every right to appeal a District Court decision, nonetheless the net effect in the case of the President and the tapes has been to sow in deeper the impression that he is using legal maneuvers to conceal the contents of the tapes.

- A further indication of the worsening of Mr. Nixon's position is evident in the results of yet another question in the latest survey, in which, by 50 to 39 per cent, the public expresses the view that "if it is proven that President Nixon knew about the cover-up of White House involvement in Watergate, he should resign." In August, an identical question yielded a 49-to-44 per cent plurality which thought he should not resign, even if such proof were forthcoming.

- By 60 to 24 per cent, a majority of the American people has reached the conclusion that the President "did know about the attempt to cover up White House involvement in Watergate while it was going on." However, when asked "in view of what has happened in the Watergate affair, should President Nixon resign or not?" by 56 to 31 per cent a majority still believes he should not resign.

The public wants to be fair and is reluctant to think of resignation or impeachment until the link has been made between an official charge or finding by the Senate Watergate committee, or a court, that Mr. Nixon was involved in the cover-up, or until the President actually refuses a court order to turn over the tapes in camera to a panel of judges. However, the number who believe Mr. Nixon should resign has gone up steadily from 14 to 31 per cent since last May.

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