

The Compromise That Backfired

UNDER CIRCUMSTANCES loaded with irony, President Nixon is entangled in the gravest of his many historical crises, this one marked by cries for "resignation or impeachment."

His plunge into deep trouble resulted, curiously enough, from his efforts to compromise the fierce dispute over disclosure of the famous White House tapes — through an offer to give the courts and the Senate Watergate committee, a supervised summary, or transcript—of relevant portions of the tapes.

THEN, ILL-ADVISEDLY, he summarily dismissed Archibald Cox, the special Watergate prosecutor, for refusal to accept that compromise. The dismissal promptly proved itself ill-timed, a product of extremely poor judgment and a producer of shattering mischief. Attorney General Richardson resigned rather than fire his personally selected prosecutor; William Ruckelshaus, the Deputy Attorney General was fired for refusing to do so, and, as one interested observer phrased it "the wheels fell off the buggy."

The great irony in this obviously tragic situation resides in these circumstances: The compromise proposal marked an unexpected retreat of the President from a hitherto unshakable position; it was a compromise urged by the court and fair enough to win approval of both the chairman and vice-chairman of the Watergate committee; and was something of a victory for Cox, whose discharge was quite legal, though demonstrably ill-considered and highly impolitic.

WHETHER THE COMPROMISE will satisfy District Judge Sirica, who had ordered that the tapes, themselves, be delivered to him for review, may be determined by the judge today. Through hindsight, it is unmistakably clear that the President would have far better served himself and the country had he postponed the firing of Cox — which the White House says was inevitable — until the decision came down. If in the President's favor, it would have provided justification for the firing; if against the President, it would have doubtless impelled him to delay the dismissal of Cox to a more propitious day.

But now the President is in trouble and so is the government. He has lost two of the Administration's respected and respectable leaders, a price far too high to pay for summary dismissal of Cox for whatever reason. The Department of Justice is in a shambles, with more resignations rumored and the course of the Watergate investigation swinging in the breeze. Ratification of Gerald Ford as Vice President may face unreasonable delay and so might other appointments the President must make.

FOR ALL THAT, neither resignation nor impeachment offers a safe and sane way out of the woods. There is no Vice President, highly important decisions on both the foreign and domestic front are in the making, and the nation is in a state of shocked uncertainty, needing anything but more disruption of government.