

Back to the Mountains for Contemplation

Nixon Seen Still in Deepest

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An embattled Richard M. Nixon went back up the mountain to Camp David last night to lick the political wounds of his long, losing battle over the Watergate tapes and to plan tonight's television appeal for understanding from an increasingly skeptical and critical American public.

By yesterday's last-minute concession to the court order to turn over the tapes, Mr. Nixon avoided the immediate danger of a contempt citation, which almost certainly would have triggered a serious impeachment move.

But, in the judgment of political leaders in both parties, he remains in the deepest kind of trouble—trying to resist the inevitable demand for reconstituting the office of Watergate special prosecutor he abolished Saturday night—at a time when his public support appears to be at an all-time low.

House Democratic leaders, who blocked any real impeachment moves for months, were prodded into action by the public outcry over the firing of Watergate Special Prosecutor Archibald Cox, and yesterday showed no willingness to turn away from their planned preliminary investigation of the grounds for removing Mr. Nixon from office. Demands for a new special prosecutor echoed in the Senate.

White House officials, with rare candor, acknowledged that they had underestimated the ferocity and scope of the public reaction

to the firing of Cox heightened as it was by the resignations of Attorney General Elliot L. Richardson and Deputy Attorney General William D. Ruckelshaus.

Mr. Nixon abandoned the defense of executive secrecy—a principle he had insisted he would never compromise—only after receiving a virtual ultimatum from House Republican leaders and being confronted with a massive public protest of his weekend actions.

One White House official, who declined the use of his name, said Mr. Nixon's occasion was two months' too late to gain him any political credit. "The time to have done this was two months ago," he said, "not now."

Three public opinion analysts—two aligned with Republican candidates and one on the Democratic side—agreed that the damage to the President's confidence and credibility ratings in the past days and months would not be repaired by his decision to turn over the tapes.

Peter Hart, the Democratic campaign consultant, said, "My own feeling is that the President's credibility is so badly smashed, I don't think it can recover. You can't put Humpty Dumpty together again."

The one visible gain to the President from his agreement to turn over the tapes came from the renewed expressions of support from liberal Republicans, who had deserted him in droves over the weekend.

Indiana Republican Chairman Thomas S. Milligan, who on Monday had said he

could no longer presume Mr. Nixon innocent of the Watergate Charges, said, "I'm extremely gratified to hear that the President has seen fit to make a disclosure of the material in the tapes . . . This will substantially remove the problem the President has experienced in a breakdown of public confidence and approval."

Washington Gov. Daniel J. Evans, who early yesterday had raised "questions about President Nixon's ability to effectively govern the country," said the release of the tapes "should satisfy those who have called for full and open disclosure . . ."

Michigan Gov. William G. Milliken, who had "deplored" the firing of Cox and the resignations of Richardson and Ruckelshaus, called the tapes turnaround "a welcome and affirmative step which will go a long way to help restore the faith and confidence of the public—which at this moment are at an all-time low."

Other reactions from political figures were mainly reaffirmations of previous positions. California Gov. Ronald Reagan (R) said, "Yesterday, I urged that all of us should be patient . . . I think this action justifies our continued patience and confidence . . ."

Republican National Chairman George Bush, who had said earlier that Mr. Nixon was in a "confidence crisis," said the President's action "will have a soothing effect. Clearly it will help politically . . . Hopefully, his move will cool the emotions and permit the President to deal

with matters of enormous domestic and international concern."

Democratic National Chairman Robert S. Strauss said, "I don't know who's running the country or how it's being run . . . I'm glad we have the tapes, but I don't think the tapes were the real issue."

Strauss predicted that the Democratic National Committee, meeting in Louisville Thursday, would call on Congress to "create an independent prosecutor to go forward with the work that Richardson and Cox were charged to do and felt so strongly should be done."

There were a number of indications that Mr. Nixon's critics would simply shift their fire from the tapes question to the independent investigator issue.

Senate Democrats chomped a call for an independent prosecutor and some, but not all, House Republicans voiced a similar demand in meetings yesterday with White House officials.

Arnold Miller, president of the United Mine Workers, said, "President Nixon should not be allowed to trade nine tape recordings for an end to an independent investigation into the crimes of his administration. He has lost the moral authority to lead the nation. He should resign and the investigation he has tried to destroy must go forward."

The Ripon Society, a liberal Republican group which had called for the President's impeachment, also said the condition for his remaining in office

Trouble

should be the acceptance of an independent prosecutor.

So far the President appears ready to resist—or at least to attempt resistance. But pollsters in both parties expressed grave doubts yesterday about his ability to rally public support with tonight's speech.

A Republican campaign consultant, fresh from visits to clients in New York and Michigan, said, "I've never heard such strong negative comments about a President as we were picking up over the weekend. They were almost vicious. He was just being overwhelmed."

Another Republican opinion analyst said, "The independent voter won't buy this—and he's right. If we are not careful, the independents will decide that Republicans have forfeited their right to govern, and then everyone is down the drain."

Peter Hart, the Democratic pollster, expressed a similar view. "I've never seen such low ratings as the President is drawing," he said. "They're lower than (John) Lindsay at his worst point in New York. I think there's nothing left to resurrect."

While those judgments may be proved wrong, the tenor of the mail and other reactions reaching Washington yesterday was devastatingly anti-Nixon. The offices of such conservative senators as Barry M. Goldwater (R-Ariz.) and James L. Buckley (R-Con.-N.Y.), who normally would have expected pro-Nixon messages, reported that "nearly all" their wires were calling for impeachment.