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The terrible price that Nixon paid

ANALYSIS

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WASHINGTON — Ever since the secret of President Nixon's Watergate tapes slipped out last July, the President has been paying a terrible price to keep them away from the courts and Congress.

Why, then, about noon yesterday, did he suddenly abandon his long struggle and meekly agree to surrender the tapes to Judge John J. Sirica?

The answer boils down to this: The price of secrecy skyrocketed over the long holiday weekend to a level that even Richard Nixon felt he could no longer afford to pay.

White House officials admitted yesterday that they were startled and staggered by the country's hostile reaction to the "Saturday massacre" that wiped Archibald Cox, Elliot Richardson and William Ruckelshaus off the government payroll.

Staff Chief Alexander Haig used scary words like "nightmare," "firestorm" and "maelstrom" to describe the situation which the President faced when he walked into the Oval Office yesterday morning.

Outside the White House gate, automobile horns could be heard honking for his impeachment. On Capitol Hill, the House of Representatives was gearing up preliminary machinery for a possible impeachment. Opinion polls showed massive disapproval of the President's actions. Frantic Republicans were scurrying for cover. Nixon's Mideast peace pact was breaking down, and his international credibility was being undermined. He was in danger of being exposed, to use one of his phrases, as a "pitiful, helpless giant."

Speculation raged in Washington, however, about whether Nixon might have had other, undisclosed reasons for finally surrendering his tapes.

One theory was that the dismissal of Cox, a thorn in his side almost from the day he took office, at least made it easier for Nixon to yield.

As Cox himself made plain over the weekend, the tapes themselves were no longer the central bone of contention between him and Nixon.

In fact, Cox has said privately that he thinks the nine Watergate tapes he subpoenaed in July will be inconclusive — just as the president said they would be. They will neither prove nor disprove that Nixon was involved in the Watergate cover-up, Cox believed.

Cox's primary interest in getting the tapes was to make it possible for him to prosecute other key Nixon aides who he believed were guilty not only of covering up Watergate but of other criminal actions as well.

Without the tapes, men like former Attorney General John Mitchell and former Commerce Secretary Maurice Stans could argue that they were being denied evidence that might prove their innocence. Cox ad-

mitted that this is a powerful argument for any defendant to use.

What Cox really wanted, and what really led Nixon to fire him, was other material beside the nine Watergate tapes — memos and records involving the ITT affair, the Vesco case, the diary fund, the Ellsberg burglary, and, especially, information on secret money deals, such as the \$100,000 Howard Hughes gave to Nixon's friend, C. G. "Bebe" Rebozo.

A number of White House aides felt Cox was roaring far beyond his original charter and was "out to get the President."

"Cox wanted us to give him the key to everything in the White House," one insider complained. "He saw himself as a little Jesus."

With Cox out of the way, the Watergate investigation back in the hands of the Justice Department, Nixon's men are undoubtedly breathing easier.

A more Machiavellian theory is that the intricate maneuvering over the tapes was actually a scheme to get rid of Cox. He became special prosecutor in May, and within a month some White House staffers were reported to be convinced the arrangement was unworkable.

Under that theory, the so-called "compromise" Nixon offered on the tapes last Friday was deliberately designed to be unacceptable to Cox. He would either have to resign or put himself in a position where the President could fire him for insubordination.

When that finally happened Saturday, one White House official admitted he had been pushing for Cox's firing for months, and said he viewed the matter "with some relish."

Yet another explanation may be that the President had lost hope of winning his battle for the tapes in the Supreme Court, and decided it was better to settle now rather than three or four months from now after a more agonizing struggle.

If he lost in the Supreme Court, Nixon would have had to give up the tapes or face almost certain impeachment.

Even now, when he was risking contempt only of the lower courts, impeachment fever was rising at a perilous rate.

Haig insisted Tuesday that impeachment was not yet "a serious problem," and other aides swore Nixon would "never" be impeached.

But the political intelligence the President was receiving must have been alarming. The country which had overwhelmingly re-elected him less than a year ago was up in arms. One poll showed his popularity was down to 22 percent — beneath President Truman's all-time low when he fired Gen. Douglas MacArthur.

In these circumstances, Nixon decided it was best to cut his losses and give up the tapes. The price of keeping them had simply become too high.