

The President's tape decision

IN A TIME of national crisis, when the American people had become deeply suspicious of their President's possible incrimination in the Watergate coverup, Richard Nixon made the correct decision in submitting his White House tapes to the federal court.

Mr. Nixon was late and reluctant in his action. Had he taken it last week, he could have avoided the bitter dispute that ensued from the resignation of Attorney General Elliot Richardson and the firing of Special Prosecutor Archibald Cox and Deputy Attorney General William Ruckelshaus.

It is tragic that the President permitted events to get so out of hand. When he finally informed the court, through his attorney, Charles Alan Wright, of his decision to turn over the tapes, he was standing on the brink of impeachment.

We respect the President's desire to defend the right of executive privilege, which is vital to preservation of the separation of powers.

BUT THE AMERICAN PEOPLE, along with politicians in both parties, found it difficult to understand how the President could withhold evidence that might prove his own guilt or innocence in the Watergate case. They wondered also why he was willing to make the tapes available to former White House assistant H. R. Haldeman and Sen. John Stennis, but not the federal court, the Senate Watergate Committee or Special Prosecutor Cox.

By his intransigence, the President had made it difficult, if not impossible, for Rep. Gerald Ford to be confirmed as Vice President. He also had weakened his administration at a time when it needed all the strength it could muster to deal with the perilous war in the Middle East.

The integrity of our government and public confidence in the President himself had been eroded by events of the past few days, following as they did on the resignation of Vice President Spiro Agnew, the indictment of two former cabinet officers and a group of former White House aides and months of revelations about tawdry Watergate criminality.

It must also be recorded that many of Mr. Nixon's critics acted hastily and intemperately in demanding his impeachment.

The task now is to restore some balance and sanity to our government.

IF THE WATERGATE CLOUD is to be lifted from the President personally, a new special prosecutor should be appointed to pursue an independent investigation. Given the situation that has developed, it is hard to see how the Justice Department can push such a probe within its own administration.

Congress should get on with the task of confirming Rep. Ford as Vice President.

Finally, now that the President has made his decision to give up the tapes, his critics should act with equal responsibility and put the interests of the government ahead of partisan considerations.