

The Avalanche

By Anthony Lewis

WASHINGTON, Oct. 24—It is a time unlike any in our experience. Events crowd in so fast, one upon another, that our emotions cannot catch up—much less our understanding.

The questions people ask reflect the deep suspicions, the skepticism, built up during the long months of Watergate: Will the tapes really show anything now? Why did the President so suddenly change his mind? Will new devices be found to obstruct the road to truth?

Skepticism is understandable, but I think it misses the real meaning of what has happened in this country in the last few days. There have been two developments that history will surely see as turning-points in our turbulent years. And they are both profoundly hopeful.

First, the supremacy of law in our constitutional system has been dramatically vindicated. That was the significance of that extraordinary moment in Judge John Sirica's courtroom when Prof. Charles Alan Wright stood up and said that his client would, after all, comply with the grand jury's subpoena.

Just consider what the alternative would have meant. Only a few days ago insiders were dropping hints that President Nixon had decided to ignore even a Supreme Court decision requiring him to turn over the tapes. Throughout the months of argument, until last Tuesday afternoon, Mr. Nixon's insistence was that the President must make the ultimate decision, not the courts.

If that view had prevailed in any form, however indirectly, its repercussions on the idea of law would have been immeasurable. One President would have established the right to trim when under an order to comply with a subpoena; another might then have evaded decrees on the use of military power, say, or the seizure of private property.

But it did not prevail. And the reason it did not was that the forces of law in the United States stood absolutely firm. The issue had become not the tapes but law itself, and that was understood. Leaders of the bar and the law schools spoke up. And Judge Sirica, that tough old trial judge, made it starkly clear that he would not accept any imposed "compromise," that he would enforce this order in its own terms like any other. That was why the President capitulated.

And it was not only the forces of law that understood. The second great lesson of the week was that the American public saw what was at stake in Mr. Nixon's attempt to impose his own terms on the courts and on the investi-

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gation of Watergate. The public responded in a way that Washington has not felt in recent memory.

Carl Albert, for example, is a man of the greatest caution. He is next in the line of Presidential succession right now, and he does not want the job. Over the years he has heard hardly a murmur of criticism of Richard Nixon from his conservative Oklahoma constituency.

For all those reasons, Speaker Albert reacted mildly over the holiday weekend to the President's firing of Archibald Cox and the resignations of Attorney General Richardson and Deputy Attorney General Ruckelshaus. Then Mr. Albert got back to Washington, talked to his colleagues and read his own telegrams—almost unanimously demanding impeachment. He decided to have the House Judiciary Committee undertake an investigation of grounds for impeachment.

The thousands of telegrams and letters and telephone calls have had their effect. Members of Congress are the most reluctant heroes in this country, but many of them sense now that the public wants them at last to face the problem that has torn America apart and brought Government to a stop—the problem of this President.

Even the capitulation on the tapes did not seem to calm public outrage as some experts expected. It was as if Mr. Nixon's gyrations had gone beyond acceptance, beyond belief. And so, for the first time, people were ready to look the idea of impeachment in the face and not flinch.

That turn in public opinion, if such it is, could be fatal to a President who has made a career of daredevil rescues of his own reputation. For there is a point beyond which lost legitimacy cannot be recaptured.

There is another potent threat to Richard Nixon: the expanding investigations of Watergate and other crimes. For after this week they cannot be stopped. The prosecutor, whoever he is, will have to insist on every scrap of evidence. Witnesses able to incriminate the highest levels of the White House will know that the power to obstruct justice is fading. They will talk to save their own skins.

Last weekend President Nixon tried one way out of his dilemma: a coup that would put him in unchallenged control. The country has rejected that course. The best Mr. Nixon can hope for now is to survive under continuous challenge, investigation and doubt. That is why even Republicans on Capitol Hill are privately hoping that somehow he will decide to put the country ahead of himself, and resign.