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Impeachment: 'Only Way to Truth'

A weekend ago, it seemed that the calls for the President's resignation—from his friends and foes alike—would almost certainly build into an irresistible chorus. Such disparate voices as The Detroit News and The New York Times, as Joseph Alsop and Edward Brooke, were saying: Resign; for the good of the country, resign.

But last week witnessed a different chorus, from the same political spectrum if not from the same voices: The President mustn't resign; he must be impeached.

The conservative columnist James J. Kilpatrick, who in October was arguing the case against the President's removal, was saying last week that "nothing else (except impeachment) will clear the poisonous air and restore a sense of domestic tranquility."

Toni Wicker, the liberal columnist for The New York Times, was arguing against resignation as a "constitutional shortcut." Impeachment is the only acceptable course, he said.

The generally conservative Washington Star-News, while stopping short of a call for impeachment, did urge the House Judiciary Committee to push forward its investigation of "whether a case for impeachment of the President exists." In any case, the newspaper said, resignation would be an inappropriate alternative.

What does it all mean, the spurt of impeachment talk following hard on the heels of the resignation advice?

It could mean something as narrowly partisan as (a) the conservatives wanting impeachment as the likeliest way of clearing their man and (b) the

liberals wanting impeachment as the surest way of humiliating and disgracing him.

I think it means something else. I think it represents a growing conviction—and not just among columnists and editorialists—that impeachment is the only way we will ever know the truth about what's going on with President Nixon. Incidentally, it also may represent a growing understanding that impeachment is not the same as conviction, but merely an official accusation.

If the only concern is to get Richard Nixon out of office, either because he is no longer able to lead the country or because he is a crook, then resignation would work just fine. It would, in fact, be the preferred method, since it would avoid the disruptiveness and the polarization of impeachment proceedings.

But the removal of Richard Nixon is not the only consideration. Those who believe, as I do, that something has gone profoundly wrong with the federal government (not merely that conservatives are running it instead of liberals) want catharsis. We want to know whether our suspicions are well-founded, and if they are, how widespread the malignancy is so that it can be rooted out.

Scarcely anyone seems to believe any more that we can learn the truth through presidentially appointed investigators. The President is too much in the role of suspect to be counted on for an impartial investigation.

In spite of all the negative points he has chalked up through his unwillingness to cooperate with the on-going investigation, he still seems to be holding back. One example: The suggestion was made that, since Mr. Nixon acknowledges that he listened to some of the White House tapes before the automatic recording system was removed, there is a chance that there is a recording of the "missing" recording.

But instead of welcoming that suggestion as a way of resolving some of the doubts over who is telling the truth, the White House response was, in effect: Judge Sirica ordered us to give up nine tapes, and the recording of the recording is not one of the nine. If you want that one, you'll have to go to court again.

That would be an altogether respectable position for a suspect in a criminal investigation to take. A suspect has no obligation to make it easy for the D.A. to convict him. A criminal suspect may properly be more interested in his own acquittal than in having the truth come out.

If the President wants to acknowledge that he is a criminal suspect, and claim his right to Fifth Amendment protection against self-incrimination, that's fine. But he can't have it both ways; he can't be chief suspect and chief investigator at the same time.

Even if he would like to be. Just for the sake of the argument, accept the possibility that Richard Nixon is guilty of even more serious crimes and improprieties than is generally suspected, and assume that he knows that an honest, open investigation would make that guilt known. What would he do differently in such a case than he is doing now? And if noncooperation didn't work, would a resignation calculated to end the investigation serve the national interest?

In short, isn't impeachment the only means by which we are likely to learn the truth that could save the country?