

The Whole Story Will Come Out

The President's frenetic public relations efforts over the past two weeks have served to disguise, but not to alter, the stark seriousness of his situation.

He is fighting for his political life, with the knowledge that the whole story of his role in the transactions that have aroused public suspicion must now emerge. The President has not yet told that story; all he has done, in his meetings with Republican politicians and the press, is to say that it will be told. And in doing that, he is doing no more than acknowledging the obvious. The tough times for him still lie ahead.

For the past month, Mr. Nixon's position has been essentially the same as Spiro Agnew faced when the federal prosecutors in Baltimore last August put him on notice that he was under investigation on serious charges. The Agnew investigation had begun with a host of subsidiary characters, just as the Nixon investigation did. But in both cases, the focus worked its way to the top—and stayed there until the critical questions were resolved.

Agnew was never indicted, and Mr. Nixon may never be impeached, but there can no longer be any doubt in his mind that the whole story will come out. The political imperative which makes full disclosure inevitable in Mr. Nixon's case is the same as in Agnew's: the Republican Party, which nominated both, will not intervene to spare him, any more than it did Agnew, from the burden of full disclosure.

Agnew learned that when a Republican prosecutor, acting with the obvious approval of a Republican Attorney General and a Republican President, filed his formal notice of investigation last August 2.

Mr. Nixon received the same word from Republican congressional leaders on Oct. 23, the Tuesday after the long holiday weekend on which Cox, Richardson and Ruckelshaus were eliminated. The President's emissaries went up to Capitol Hill that day to line up Republican support against impeachment demands. They were told, and bluntly, that no Republican leader would speak up on his behalf unless the President was prepared to come clean.

The first step in coming clean, Mr. Nixon was told, would be to turn over the White House tapes. That afternoon, two hours after the ultimatum had come from the Republicans on Capitol Hill, the President abandoned his three-month fight to withhold the

tapes.

Even should Mr. Nixon now desire to backtrack and stop short of full disclosure, the pressures pushing in that direction appear irreversible. Every passing day brings the House Republicans one day closer to their day of reckoning with their constituents. To support the President against impeachment, they will require of him complete candor.

The new independent prosecutor, starting from the base Archibald Cox left behind, is moving toward indictments of some of Mr. Nixon's principal past associates. The Senate Watergate committee is approaching the deadline for rendering its judgment on the matters it has been investigating.

Any effort, however mild, by Mr. Nixon to interfere in these processes will come at high cost to his own depleted reserves of trust. Every additional foot of tape declared nonexistent or inaudible comes out of his hide. He has already conceded about 90 per cent of the ground he set out to protect last spring, when Watergate broke. He cannot retreat much farther without literally being backed out of the Oval Office.

The proposition now for him is quite simple: Can he stand to come clean? If he can—if he can establish that he did not permit or direct the concealment by members of his campaign organization and White House staff of the Watergate crimes; if his role in the milk producers case, the ITT case, and the campaign contributions cases was, indeed, innocent; if the handling of his personal finances has been in every respect aboveboard—then full disclosure will enable him to rout his critics and restore his credibility and power.

If, on the other hand, he cannot stand scrutiny, then he will be driven from office, as surely as Agnew was.

A reporter covering this story is the last one who should prejudge its final chapter. But certain ominous parallels are becoming obvious. Agnew lasted a little more than nine weeks after he knew he would have to come clean. He employed various tactics in that period, first pledging cooperation in the investigation, then finding reasons to delay turning over evidence, waging war with his critics in the press and government, and finally "going public" to mobilize sympathy for his stand.

In retrospect, we can see that those were the writhings of an impaled creature. Agnew was dancing at the end of a rope.

We do not know if Mr. Nixon's situation is as desperate, but his tactics this past month have been exactly those Agnew employed in his final weeks in office. Now, like Agnew, he has come finally to face the realization that it will all come out. He knows what that means for him. We will soon enough know, too.