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Staff of 31 Gathers Data For Impeachment Probe

House Judiciary Committee Chairman Peter W. Rodino (D-N.J.) said yesterday he has a staff of 31 at work collecting data for the committee's impeachment inquiry on President Nixon and expects to name an outside special counsel before Christmas.

Reportedly high on the list of possibilities to direct the staff work is federal Judge Frederick B. Lacey, 53, whose court sits in Rodino's home city of Newark. Lacey was a racket-busting U.S. attorney who successfully prosecuted several New Jersey politicians for corruption before he was named to the federal bench by President Nixon in 1970.

Senior committee members reportedly want a respected Republican-approved lawyer, so as to avoid criticism that they are trying

to mount a partisan Democratic attack.

It would seem unusual for a still relatively young federal judge to give up a lifetime appointment for a job that may end in six months. But Lacey reportedly has indicated he wants to leave the bench and return to private law practice. Both Rodino and the judge's staff refused to comment on whether he is being considered for the position.

Rodino also refused to estimate how long the inquiry into Watergate and related matters will take. He said he expects the staff will grow to 40 or 50.

Staff members of the Judiciary Committee and investigators from the General Accounting Office have been assembling information on various charges against the President and storing it in a computer, said Rodino.