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The Democrats' Impeachment Strategy

Behind the historic struggle over impeachment procedures between Democrats and Republicans on the House Judiciary Committee looms a massive Democratic assault against President Nixon that is certain to deepen his present miseries.

Republicans in both the White House and Congress see the slowly forming impeachment investigation by the judiciary committee as not only posing the steepest threat yet to Mr. Nixon but also dooming meager Republican election prospects in 1974. "These are not Sam Erwins—not Southern gentlemen—the White House is coming up against," one Republican member of the committee predicts. "These guys are out for blood."

Substantiating this Republican fear is the closing of the gap over impeachment politics between fire-eating junior Democratic congressmen who abound on the judiciary committee and the party's leadership in the House. Both leaders and fire-eaters now agree on this strategy: Delay a vote until a long hard investigation generates nationwide impeachment sentiment, probably next summer at the earliest.

The reason for delay stems from current facts of life on the judiciary com-

mittee. Even if all 21 Democrats were to vote for impeachment (most unlikely), it is doubtful that any of the 17 Republicans would join them. The White House has doubts about only one Republican, Rep. William S. Cohen, a first-term liberal from Maine. But not even Cohen would vote for a bill of impeachment today.

Accordingly, an impeachment vote in the judiciary committee today would be a party-line affair, saddling the Democrats with the stigma of political vendetta against the President. Their leaders, Speaker Carl Albert of Oklahoma and majority leader Thomas O. O'Neill of Massachusetts, have always avoided such a catastrophe. What's significant is that many fire-eaters, formerly determined on immediate action against Mr. Nixon, now agree.

A case in point is Rep. Jerome Waldie of California, an early impeachment advocate and a leader of the fire-eaters. Waldie now rules out Republican support for impeachment until the public demands it. The public will not demand it until the committee's investigation spreads evidence before it, he feels, and that will take many months.

While the fire-eaters thus subdue their zeal, old-line Democratic leaders have hardened their own determina-

tion to pursue the President. Indeed, this determination took wing only after Gerald Ford was confirmed as Vice President, restoring a legitimate Republican succession.

The rudest shock was the vote of Rep. Peter Rodino, chairman of the judiciary committee, against Ford's confirmation. Republicans until then had regarded Rodino, a product of New Jersey machine politics, as one of the boys who would move with cautious restraint. His vote against Ford, dictated no little by Rodino's increasingly black constituency, has convinced the Republicans they can expect no quarter from him.

Moreover, Albert and O'Neill have taken an increasingly tough line against the President in private conversation. Albert's all-out sponsorship of the \$1 million to finance the impeachment investigation reveals his inner strategy.

Against the newly united Democrats, the White House is urging house Republicans to protest impeachment delays and demand an immediate vote. Republican leaders are studying the possibility of bringing Mr. Nixon's impeachment to the floor as a constitutionally privileged motion.

But judiciary committee Republi-



Rep. Peter Rodino (D-N.J.), chairman of the House Judiciary Committee

cans do not seem well equipped to compete with the Democrats for public opinion. The committee's senior Republican, Rep. Edward Hutchinson, is an old-fashioned Michigan conservative who shies away from television exposure. The committee's most forceful Republican, Rep. Tom Railsback of Illinois, ranks fifth in seniority, and his aggressiveness is resented by senior colleagues (including second-ranking Rep. Robert McCloy, a fellow Illinoisan).

Far more important, committee Republicans are by no means irrevocably committed to the President's defense. Many fear a midterm election debacle with Mr. Nixon in the White House. ("He's queering my re-election," grumbles one senior Republican on the committee.) Conservative committee Republicans say privately they will vote a bill of impeachment if it is supported by the evidence.

As with so much else in the bottomless Watergate pit, Mr. Nixon and the White House seem helpless in any effort to control, impede or stop the kind of proceeding now being planned by the House Judiciary Committee. It could lead to the worst menace he has yet faced.