

Nixon Hardens Tone

Aides Say Removal Lacks Local Push

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Jan. 5—The unyielding tone of President Nixon's defiant answer to the Senate Watergate committee is based on a survey of key congressional districts which purportedly shows declining sentiment for impeachment.

White House sources said that the lack of any strong grassroots push for impeachment hardened Mr. Nixon in his first impulses of refusing to cooperate with the committee. Mr. Nixon on Friday declined to comply with committee subpoenas for nearly 500 documents and called the request an attempt at "an unconstitutional usurpation of power."

At the same time, according to one highly placed aide, Mr. Nixon has determined to turn over his Watergate defense "lock, stock and barrel" to James D. St. Clair, the high-powered Boston attorney who took over the Watergate defense Friday. St. Clair will become the President's defense attorney, heading a beefed-up "legal task force," if the House votes an impeachment resolution.

Up to now the President has been keeping in touch day-to-day with the legal maneuverings on Watergate. Despite public utterances to the contrary, White House officials have been increasingly concerned with the way in which Watergate has distracted Mr. Nixon from other issues.

Now, say the President's aides, this period of personal immersion in Watergate is over.

A survey of more than 20 strategic congressional districts, mostly based on the findings of congressmen who were home for the holiday recess, has convinced Mr. Nixon that the popular groundswell which the White House regards as a condition for a successful

impeachment move is lacking.

However, the survey does show that the President is held in minimum regard by many voters and that the related issues of energy and the economy are politically troublesome both for the administration and the Republican Party.

Aides say that the President has concluded from this combination of good news and bad news that his

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best chances of avoiding impeachment and regaining a measure of popularity lie in successful domestic initiatives. The No. 1 priority, which also relates to Mr. Nixon's foreign policy objectives, is to end the Arab oil embargo and to be able to announce to the American people that the energy shortage has eased.

Mr. Nixon is also said to believe that his historical role as "peacemaker" will be assured if the Arab-Israeli talks end in some kind of settlement and if he is able to broaden the detente with both the Soviet Union and China.

"He is going to go full speed ahead toward these and other objectives and let the lawyers defend Watergate," said one key aide. "We don't think there are the votes for impeachment, but in the unlikely event that impeachment occurs, he'll then be in the position of going down with all flags flying."

This comment reflects the basic dualism of the White House thinking on Watergate. On one hand, the President is convinced he has recovered sufficiently to go on the offensive against the Senate Watergate committee and to boldly express the unyielding attitude he has always held toward committee requests for coopera-

tion. On the other, he proceeds with the underlying assumption that he has lost ground with the American people that can never be recovered.

This, in turn, has led to the conclusion by Mr. Nixon that his best chance for survival lies in showing the American people that he is still a capable leader despite all the disclosures of the Watergate scandal.

Mr. Nixon is described as almost reconciled to the fact that he will remain an unpopular President through the balance of his term. He has sometimes spoken to aides of President Truman's low popularity in 1952, adding that Mr. Truman is now widely regarded as having been a good President.

Only this past week, chief of staff Alexander M. Haig Jr. said that Mr. Nixon believes that the "judgment of history" will rank him as a President of high achievement.

The President is also depicted as being much more assured about his Watergate defense now that it is in the hands of St. Clair J. Fred Buzhardt, who will leave the Watergate defense to become White House counsel, had been the subject of private criticism about his legal strategy.

White House spokesman Gerald L. Warren said Friday there was "no dissatisfaction," but Buzhardt's ostensible promotion has not been accompanied by the usual words of presidential praise. Within the White House, Buzhardt is lauded for his loyalty, but there is a feeling that he was over his head on the Watergate defense.

One sign of the administration's new posture is its abandonment of any further pretense at "Operation Candor."

The White House has refused to say when long-promised documents dealing with



United Press International

James D. St. Clair, new presidential legal adviser, holds press conference at offices of Boston law firm.

the ITT and milk fund scandals will be made public. But aides have told reporters here not to expect any press conferences or other public appearances by the President during his extended stay in California.

Mr. Nixon has concluded, an aide said, that he is in a "no win position" with major newspapers and the television networks and does not want to risk any more public questioning on Watergate.

The White House was insistent Friday on pointing out the size and scope of the Watergate committee subpoenas, apparently in the belief that this would lead to public support of the President's defiance. Warren went so far as to call the bureau chief of United

Press International, protesting that the lead of the story about the President's letter to Committee Chairman Sam J. Ervin Jr. did not mention the specific number of documents requested.

But with all this, not even the most optimistic Nixon aide expects that either Watergate or the related administration scandals will be forgotten.

"It's now a question merely of whether people want to impeach the President for Watergate or get on to other things," said one aide.

Based on the administration's recent survey of congressional districts, the President has concluded that the immediate push for impeachment is lacking.