

White House Feels Tide Is Against Impeachment Vote

By Lou Cannon

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The White House decision to cut off the flow of Watergate-related information is based upon a conviction that the political tide is running strongly against impeachment, according to informed sources.

A former Nixon official who still is close to the President said that Vice President Ford has told Mr. Nixon that an impeachment resolution will not clear even the House Judiciary Committee.

This same source said that Mr. Nixon told him he believes that "time is on his side" in the impeachment battle as long as the country is convinced that he is doing his job as President.

The President last week refused to turn over any more tapes about the Watergate scandal to his own special prosecutor, Leon Jaworski.

This has provoked fears on the House Judiciary Committee that the White House will give appearances of cooperation without being truly cooperative in the furnishing of tapes and documents.

"It appears now that the White House strategy, if it reacts to the House as it has its own special prosecutor, is to subject us to a programmed delay and orchestrated accusations of foot-dragging on the committee's part while it buries deeper any possible bit of incriminating evidence," said Rep. Jack Brooks (D-Tex.), one of the Judiciary Committee's more influential members.

There was no outward sign of this foot-dragging in the first polite meeting last week between John Doar, the committee's special counsel, and James D. St. Clair, the head of the President's legal team. Much of the meeting was occupied with St. Clair's questions about committee procedures for preserving the confidentiality of evidence given to the Judiciary Committee.

Privately, however, some of the Democratic members of the committee were highly critical of Doar after he meeting with St. Clair.

the political problems of committee members if the impeachment procedure is long delayed.

One such member is Rep. James Mann of South Carolina, a Democrat and former prosecutor who represents a district that voted overwhelmingly for Mr. Nixon. Like most members of the committee, Mann says his vote will be based on the evidence and not on a poll of his constituency, but he shares the belief that time is on the side of the anti-impeachment forces.

"The time the steam out of the impeachment movement," Mann says.

This view is held also by Rep. Thomas Railsback of Illinois, a Republican who is regarded on the committee as a possible vote on either side of the issue.

Railsback, too, says he will vote on the evidence but he thinks that "politics is bound to play a role" in the committee's decision if the ultimate question is a close one. The Illinois congressman also believes that there is a possibility the entire issue may be diverted into a court fight about what evidence should be turned over to the committee.

Several Democrats will favor such a delay if it postpones a vote on impeachment until after the election, Railsback believes.

Democratic members on the committee who are pushing for impeachment are fearful that the White House will follow a strategy of legal delays while at the same time charging that the Democrats are hamstringing Mr. Nixon's effectiveness by pursuing the impeachment inquiry at all.

"This business of saying get off the President's back implies that we ought to go away and leave him alone, which we can't do and meet our constitutional responsibility," says Mann.

The only way for the committee to circumvent the White House strategy, in the view of some of the more insistent Democrats, is for Doar to quickly use his subpoena power and get a court order for the documents he needs if they are not immediately forthcoming from St. Clair.

"St Clair is acting like a defense attorney, which is what one would expect under the circumstances, and no defense attorney is anxious to bring his client to trial in a case like this," said one committee source. "What we need is a prosecutor."

It is the complaint of some committee members that Doar fails to appreciate

"He's deliberate and thorough and he'll get where he's going with a good case," said one Democrat last week. "But in view of the political realities, he can't waste time waltzing with St. Clair."