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Growing Odds On Impeachment

The odds on President Nixon's impeachment have risen sharply since the indictment of seven of his former close aides on a wide variety of criminal charges. It strained credulity to the breaking point to believe he could not have known about the cover-up and the pay-off of the Watergate burglary as charged against the seven who were his intimates in the White House and the re-election committee.

Then there is the threat of the sealed presentment handed to Judge John Sirica along with the indictments. That is said to contain allegations of the President's involvement which the grand jury withheld.

The clutch of indictments makes things clear. It would have been simple common sense, as some of us wrote, for Nixon to have faced the facts when he learned them, dismissing his principal aides and asking for public understanding of his failure to have held to account men once enjoying his complete trust. At one stroke that would have drawn the sting of Watergate and the public would have accepted this act of contrition.

Vice President Ford was frank at one point in expressing to this reporter his puzzlement over why the President had not followed that course. With honesty and sincerity as the bedrock of his character, Ford could not understand the failure to make a clean breast of the involvement of Halde- man, Ehrlichman & Company and have done with it.

Ron Ziegler, the President's press secretary, put it quite another way when he reportedly said, "Contrition is ———." Whatever the outcome of the trial, it is hard to escape the conclusion that all the tortuous months of denial and protestation of innocence were inevitable because the President's own involvement was spelled out in documents to be kept secret on the ground of "executive privilege."

The President has said repeatedly that Watergate should be left to the judicial process. The trials of the seven will take an estimated four months and other indictments are still to come. With appeal to higher courts added on for many more months, the judicial process stretches a long way into the future.

For all the skill of the arguments of his Chief Counsel, James St. Clair, the narrow view of impeachment—that only a criminal act is grounds for impeachment—is unlikely to prevail. The proof of his own responsibility for the act of his subordinates threatens to destroy this narrow posture.

The findings of the grand jury will be a big assist for the House Judiciary Committee conducting that inquiry. Whether the presentment will be part of the record forwarded to the committee is up to Judge Sirica. With the inexorable quality of a Greek tragedy, the drama of Watergate is moving to a climax.