

WXP
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Impeachment Politics

Impeachment of the President, once an almost forbidden subject, has suddenly emerged as the dominant political issue in Washington. Without exactly saying so, national figures in both parties are lining up around the question.

Two Democrats—Chairman Robert Strauss of the national committee and Chairman Wilbur Mills of the House Ways and Means Committee—provide the best sign of the times. Both are men cautious by temperament who have to appeal to all strands of opinion in their party.

Mr. Strauss until recently has been actively discouraging talk of impeachment on the theory it would help the Democrats to have Mr. Nixon to kick around for the next three years. But last week he took a step that can only intensify impeachment fever. He told a press briefing that Democrats should "run on the issues, and the issue is very clear—the Nixon leadership."

At the same time, Mr. Strauss released results of a poll of the voters who, in the special election of March 5, sent a Democrat to the House to represent the overwhelmingly Republican first district of Ohio. The poll showed that with independents, who were decisive in the first district as they have been in the country, Watergate was as big an issue as inflation or energy.

It further showed that when the word impeachment was avoided, the majority of voters favored action against the President. Thus, 58 per cent said they would want their congressman to vote to have the Senate "hold a trial to determine President Nixon's innocence or guilt on the charges related to Watergate." But that, of course, is precisely what an impeachment vote in the House would mean.

As to Mr. Mills, he has risen in the

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House thanks to an uncanny knack for positioning himself where the majority is going to end up. "Never, never get in front of your troops," he once said in a word of advice to a younger House member, "until you're sure the battle is won."

Last week Mr. Mills moved way out in front. He declared that something would be happening "in 30 or 40 days" that would cause the President to resign. The something is the report on Mr. Nixon's tax problems by a congressional committee on which Mr. Mills serves.

That Mr. Mills would thus prejudge the committee report suggests that he believes the House is going to want Mr. Nixon out. While he is not committed, it would be very hard for him to vote to keep Mr. Nixon in. Apparently his judgment is that the House will go for impeachment.

On the Republican side, there is an equal perception that the issue now is impeachment. "The whole focus," the President's Watergate counsel James St. Clair said the other day, "has changed from a secret investigation by the grand jury to impeachment proceedings conducted by the House."

That the House prospect is unfavorable is equally affirmed by White House actions. Mr. Nixon is more and more allying himself with the small

bunch of Senate conservatives who would constitute the nucleus of the 34 votes necessary to beat back the two-thirds majority necessary for sustaining an impeachment.

In that vein, Mr. Nixon has taken a last-ditch stand against gas rationing and truly tough taxation of the oil companies. He has come out for the death penalty for kidnaping cases. He has put forward—at a time embarrassing to himself but convenient to Senate conservatives—a campaign reform law without provision for public financing.

Particularly notable is the elaborate courting by the White House of Sen. Barry Goldwater (R-Ariz.). Mr. Nixon has taken one Goldwater intimate, Dean Burch, into the White House staff. Moreover, when Senator Goldwater expressed opposition to the prospective appointment of former Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Nitze as Assistant Secretary for International Security Affairs, the White House drew back. Though Mr. Nitze is uniformly recognized as a highly qualified official, though he is strongly backed by Defense Secretary James Schlesinger, though the votes are there in the Armed Services committee for his confirmation, the nomination is being held up in deference to Senator Goldwater.

What all this means is that the impeachment dynamic has already been set in motion. The shadow of the coming test colors major actions by the President and all other political leaders.

While the outcome remains unclear, their actions have already filled the wind with straws. The indications are that the House will vote articles of impeachment, and that the true crunch will come—if Mr. Nixon remains resolute in his refusal to step down—in the Senate.

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