

The Impeach Panel Splits --Party Lines

Washington

The House Judiciary Committee has plunged into its first serious party-line dispute — over a request by President Nixon's special Watergate counsel for the right to play an active role in the House impeachment inquiry.

James D. St. Clair, the President's lawyer, told the committee in two letters the panel made public yesterday that it is "imperative" that he be permitted to "cross-examine witnesses, suggest witnesses to be called, and introduce relevant and material evidence for the committee's consideration."

At separate closed caucuses Tuesday, the committee's Democratic majority agreed to oppose the request and the Republican minority decided to support it.

At the same time, several other partisan splits developed in Congress over the impeachment proceeding. They included the following:

House Republican leader John J. Rhodes of Arizona acknowledged that he had met privately with St. Clair twice and said the judiciary

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committee should "limit their investigation" to serious criminal allegations against Mr. Nixon and let a disinterested third party decide what White House tape recordings should be given to the inquiry.

Senator Robert C. Byrd, of West Virginia, the Senate Democratic whip, told newsmen he is convinced that the White House is trying to "goad" the House judiciary committee into premature action on impeachment. Byrd also accused the President of "deliberately distorting the truth" by telling audiences at nationally televised appearances that he is cooperating with Watergate investigators.

The impending split in the House committee over St. Clair's request was the most serious of the developments. The committee chairman, Representative Peter W. Rodino Jr., (Dem-N.J.) averted a showdown on the issue by pledging to schedule a meeting to consider formally the White House bid to take part in the investigation.

Rodino called the request "a matter of very, very deep concern which affects the very essence" of the inquiry.