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The President's Republicans

While President Nixon's noncooperation with the House impeachment proceedings is reducing his strength among Republican congressman generally, it is gaining him hard-rosed support where it counts: behind closed doors among Republican members of the House Judiciary Committee.

Their secret caucuses last week took on an increasingly pro-Nixon coloration, with Rep. Delbert L. Latta of Ohio as the President's point man. A combative conservative with 16 years service in the House, Latta was assigned to a committee vacancy in January precisely to shepherd and protect Mr. Nixon's interests. That was nulled down personally by Rep. John Rhodes of Arizona, the new House Republican leader, now emerging as a most valuable advocate of the President's position and a White House ally.

This poses a conflict within House Republican ranks whose outcome could determine whether Mr. Nixon is impeached. Even though the President has lost Republican strength on the House floor within the last week, he has gained Judiciary Committee allies in his attempt to cast the impeachment fight in partisan terms and precociously the House with procedural skirmishing. This contrast was evident last Monday in reaction to NBS's "Meet the Press" a day earlier, when Rep. John



Spectators line up outside the House Judiciary Committee hearing room.

Anderson of Illinois, chairman of the House Republican Conference, criticized the President's denial of documents to the Judiciary Committee.

As he walked onto the House floor, Anderson braced himself for vitriolic Nixonite congressmen. Instead, several Republican conservatives individually commended him for defending congressional prerogatives.

But there was a different mood in Monday's meeting of Judiciary Committee Republicans with the party's House leadership. Latta needed Anderson, considered liberal-to-moderate, for being called a "conservative" in one news account of his television appearance. More, pointedly, Latta recommended that Republicans who go on national television should defend the President, not blast him. That was also intended for Reps. Lawrence Hogan of Maryland and William Cohen of Maine, who had criticized Mr. Nixon's noncooperation in televised interviews.

Then Minority Leader Rhodes, one of the clearest, most subtle figures on Capitol Hill, took over. He gently chided committee Republicans for permitting the committee staff to demand detailed information about the White House indexing system. Now really, fellows, Rhodes asked, how could you get stuck into that? There was more of the same Tues-

day during a caucus of Judiciary Committee Republicans. Latta argued that Albert Jenner, the Chicago super-lawyer hired by the committee's Republicans for the impeachment proceedings, is cooperating too closely with majority counsel John Doar. Latta was strongly backed by Reps. David W. Dennis of Indiana, Charles E. Wiggins of California and Joseph J. Maraziti of New Jersey.

Their collective conception of the impeachment proceedings echoes the White House line: a conspiracy to destroy Richard M. Nixon. Why should Republican counsel Jenner join this conspiracy? In last week's meetings, Latta & Co. implicitly advocated that the Republican committee members act as the President's defenders.

More moderate Republicans on the committee are trying to appease their Nixonite colleagues. That's partly why Republicans unanimously favor Nixon lawyer James St. Clair's request to be present when committee staffers take depositions. Similarly, they agreed to quietly remove Theodore Tetzlaff, a liberal legal associate of Jenner's, from the minority staff. Tetzlaff was accused of—and denied—privately advocating Mr. Nixon's impeachment.

The White House has by no means enlisted all committee Republicans.

Rep. Edward Hutchinson of Michigan, the senior Republican, promptly rejected Rhodes' "compromise" of a third party sitting through White House evidence. One of the committee's staunchest Nixonites, Rep. Trent Lott of Mississippi, has indirectly advised the White House that refusal to supply documents until the committee issues a bill of particulars against the President only hurts Mr. Nixon.

Nevertheless, many Republicans (counsel Jenner included) are deeply troubled by the direction taken last week. Instead of assuming a neutrality that would best serve long-range Republican interests, they fear committee Republicans may increasingly join in the White House game of delay and obstruction.

Equally distressing to many Republicans, Rhodes seems to have become an enthusiastic partner in this game, even though he was originally expected to be more, not less, independent of the White House than Gerald Ford as minority leader. "I hate to say this," one senior house Republican told us, "but it looks like the President's lawyers got to Johnny." That would be at least a momentary gain for the President but could lead to ever-greater dangers for the Republican Party.