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The unity displayed by the House Judiciary Committee in its impeachment inquiry was shattered yesterday by the White House request that President Nixon's lawyer be allowed to participate in taking testimony.

At a 1½-hour committee session, Republicans solidly backed the request of Mr. Nixon's defense counsel James D. St. Clair, that he be permitted to be present when the committee or staff takes sworn testimony and to cross-examine and call witnesses. They supported it as a matter of fairness and the best way to discover whether the President should be impeached for Watergate or other matters.

Most Democrats strongly opposed letting St. Clair participate in the committee's investigative process on the ground that this would convert it into an impeachment trial, which under the Constitution must take place in the Senate.

The atmosphere was far different from last week, when the committee stood firmly together in the face of White House criticism and demanded tapes of presidential conversations. the

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committee had requested. There still has been no White House response to the request for those 41 or 42 tapes.

But some Democrats, fearing that a flat turndown of St. Clair's request might convey an attitude of unfairness, urged compromise.

Rep. Don Edwards (D-Calif.), one of the President's severest critics, urged the committee to find a solution and avoid "polarization." Rep. Jerome Waldie (D-Calif.), sponsor of an impeachment resolution, said that "as a civil libertarian" he would have a problem in excluding the President's counsel. He suggested that St. Clair might be let in if the White House cooperated by providing requested materials.

Chairman Peter W. Rodino (D-N.J.) expressed vehement opposition to converting the inquiry into an adversary proceeding. It would "pervert constitutional processes" to make the inquiry a trial, he said, but he stopped short of saying St. Clair should be kept out.

Rodino said he considered

this issue so crucial that he has asked the special impeachment staff to research it carefully and he may call in outside experts to advise the committee. He indicated that it may be some time before he asks the committee to vote on the question.

Rep. Tom Railsback (R-Ill.) said all the recent impeachment precedents, involving federal judges, are on the side of letting St. Clair take part. But Rep. Robert Drinan (D-Mass.) retorted that Mr. Nixon's case is unique in that no other subject of an impeachment inquiry has withheld evidence the committee feels it needs. If the President turns over the information requested, the committee should offer him "every reasonable opportunity to be heard," said Drinan.

Rep. Edward Hutchinson (R-Mich.), the committee's senior Republican, said St. Clair should be permitted to cross-examine witnesses because there is "no better way to glean the truth." He added that the committee could set conditions for St. Clair's participation, such as compliance with the committee's rule of confidential-

ity. But Hutchinson said he would not be part of a "deal" to let St. Clair take part in exchange for a free flow of requested materials from the White House.

Hutchinson later commented to newsmen that if the committee turned St. Clair down flat, "The White House can be expected to whip the committee to a pulp all over the country because of an apparent attitude of unfairness."

Rep. Wiley Mayne (R-Iowa) said exclusion of St. Clair would appear like a "cover-up." But Rep. Edward Mezvinsky (D-Iowa) said it appeared that St. Clair had become part of the President's "orchestrated PR machine and has joined the workgang assigned to driving a wedge" between the committee and its staff and between Democrats and Republicans. Rep. George Danielson (D-Calif.) opposed St. Clair's request as "not negotiable."

Rep. James Mann (D-S.C.) took no part in the discussion and told a reporter later that he had not made up his mind. But he observed that while a "legal purist" would say St. Clair should not be allowed to participate, the

committee might feel it should let him in to show it is being fair.

Rep. Dale Thornton (D-Ark.) said it seemed "unwise, premature and improper" to permit outside counsel to participate while the staff is assembling and sifting information for later presentation to the committee. He suggested that the President could best present his case by giving the committee the information it needs.

Thornton recalled that when the committee performed another unusual function recently—considering the vice presidential nomination of Gerald R. Ford—"He didn't bring his lawyer, but his life was an open book."

In a related action, Rep. John Conyers (D-Mich.) asked House Speaker Carl Albert to request television time to reply to "blatant misstatements" made by Mr. Nixon during the last week about the Judiciary Committee, including suggestions that the committee wants to go on a "fishing expedition" through White House files. Albert said he would consider the request.