

Toward The 'Day Of Decision'

A prominent Republican senator was telling the story this week of running into a House colleague who seemed in an unusually chipper frame of mind. When the senator asked why, the Republican House member replied: "I'm just enjoying watching you blankety-blanks sweat with this thing now."

"This thing," of course, is the question of what to do with President Nixon. And the conversation indicates a curious transformation of mood that has taken place in the past couple weeks.

What has happened is that the members of the House have come to accept the probability that they will participate in the impeachment of a President. What was unthinkable before last October's "Saturday night massacre," has now—through the mysterious chemistry of communication that operates within large assemblies—come to seem almost inevitable.

The first and most obvious result is that the tension that was building in the House during the first two months of this year has broken. The atmosphere in the Speaker's lobby, where members stroll and gossip and read the news tickers, is relaxed and almost euphoric.

"For a long time," says a veteran Democratic official of the House, "they (the House members) were struggling to find a way to avoid the collision. But now they know it's going to happen—and they know how it's going to come out."

Individually, most members of the House maintain the public posture that they will make no judgment on the impeachment question until the House Judiciary Committee has completed its investigation and made its report.

There is no reason to doubt their sincerity, but that is not the whole story. Politics operates by anticipation, and individual judgments on the political question of impeachment undoubtedly will be affected by the members' sense of where the House is headed.

The "safe" vote on question is to be on the majority side. And the spreading belief among House members that the House will vote impeachment makes it all the more likely that there will be a very substantial margin to send the case of Richard M. Nixon to the Senate for trial.

Among Republican congressional leaders, the belief is growing that the White House has all but conceded defeat on the impeachment question and is simply seeking to delay the inevitable day. "They are still checking votes over there," a Senate Republican leader says, "but I think the real effort now is to hold the line for the President on our side of the Capitol."

It is difficult for House members themselves to define the moment at which the balance shifted toward the likelihood of impeachment, but most say it came within the past two weeks.

Some suggest that it occurred when that assembly of lawyers (more than half the 435 Representatives being members of the bar) recognized the character of the defense that James St. Clair was offering for his famous client. "He is trying to narrow the issue and delay the procedure," said one Judiciary Committee Republican of the President's counsel, "and that's a dead giveaway."

By resisting the committee's request for evidence, the President probably has set back the day of decision. But he has posed the issue in a way that depicts him as interfering with the ability of the House to conduct its own constitutional business, and that makes an adverse judgment all the more certain.

"It's become a challenge to our manhood," an officially uncommitted Republican moderate said, "and there's no way we can back away from that."

House Democrats, while acknowledging that the President's legal tactics have made an impeachment vote easier, also to a shift in the political and economic climate. "The reason there's going to be a collision," said one, "is that there is complete inertia on the Republican side of the aisle. They are offering no resistance. They want him out more than we do."

Some Democrats think the back of Republican resistance was broken by the special election results in Grand Rapids, Mich., and Cincinnati. Others think the Republican financial constituency has pulled the plug on Mr. Nixon. A surprising number of House members—without visible evidence to support their view—say they believe Sen. James L. Buckley's call for resignation reflected Wall Street's worries about the possibility of a Democratic landslide in November if Mr. Nixon is still in office.

All this is atmospheric, and it could be changed dramatically if the President's inquisitors come up with no proof of his complicity in any of the transactions that are under suspicion.

But the mood in the House is adverse to Mr. Nixon's interests now, and it is not likely to be changed by the yo-yo tricks and traveling road show he has mounted. These diversions, in the words of one House Republican leader, "are about a year too late to have any effect."

The House appears to be resolved, and its members draw a certain savage satisfaction as the senators who normally lord over them now recognize that the hot potato is headed their way.