

House Committee

Nixon Puts Off Demand for Tapes

He Will
Decide by
April 22

Washington

The White House told the House Judiciary Committee last night that it needs more time to decide how to respond to the committee's request for tape recordings of 42 presidential conversations relating to Watergate.

James D. St. Clair, President Nixon's principal defense counsel in the impeachment inquiry being conducted by the committee, said in a letter that by April 22 the White House would be ready to furnish materials that "will enable the committee to complete its inquiry promptly."

But St. Clair's letter, addressed to John M. Doar, special counsel to the Judiciary Committee, contained no pledge to provide all the materials that the committee has sought. Instead, it implied that the White House would decide which of the tapes it considers relevant and release only those.

The letter also made inevitable further delays in the inquiry, despite repeated White House pressure for more speed. Last Thursday the committee set yesterday as a deadline for a presidential response to its request.

Jerome R. Waldie of California, one of the Democratic hard-liners on the committee, said shortly after the letter was released by the White House that he would move to subpoena the tapes when the committee meets tomorrow.

"Though clothed in words

that sound conciliatory," he said of St. Clair's response, "it is an outright rejection of the committee's request for assistance and it has to be read as such."

Representative Tom Railsback of Illinois, one of the more liberal Republicans, described the letter as "unresponsive," and said the committee "would be mak-

Back Page Col. 8

From Page 1

ing a mistake to let Mr. St. Clair have the sole power to decide in advance what is relevant to our inquiry."

But the reaction of senior members indicated that a subpoena is not certain, although most members were irritated that there would be a further delay before they even discover what the White House is willing to deliver.

Representative Peter W. Rodino (Dem - N.J.), the committee's chairman, said he would not comment until he had studied the letter.

Representative Robert McClory of Illinois, the committee's second-ranking Republican, described himself as disappointed, but said he would probably prefer to await the next move by the White House because "it's better to get their cooperation, even on a delayed or slightly limited basis."

When the committee first sought the tapes, the White House counterattacked by accusing the investigators of engaging in a fishing expedition. Mr. Nixon himself spoke contemptuously about Doar trying to drive "A U-Haul trailer" up to the executive mansion and haul away all its key files.

Since then, there have been extensive negotiations between Doar and St. Clair,

accompanied by continuing White House demands that the committee hurry—such as the suggestion by presidential press secretary Ronald L. Ziegler, that the committee and its staff work more nights.

Last Wednesday Doar wrote to St. Clair that "we request a reply by Tuesday, April 9, at the latest, with respect to whether or not the conversations . . . will be delivered."

St. Clair did not respond directly to that request. He complimented Doar for having narrowed the definition of the conversations originally asked for—42 in all, covering a period between February, 1973, and April, 1973—and restated Mr. Nixon's "desire to cooperate."

But the central passage of the letter said only:

"The President has directed me to advise you that a review of the materials in question is under way. We expect that the review can be completed by the end of the Easter recess, and that the additional materials furnished at that time will permit the committee to complete its inquiry promptly."

The Easter recess begins Friday and ends April 22.

Meanwhile, the Democratic majority on the House Judiciary Committee generally agreed yesterday to support at least a limited role in the impeachment inquiry for St. Clair.

Although there was no formal poll of the 21 Democrats on the 38-member committee, members reported after a caucus that a consensus appeared to form around a proposal to allow St. Clair to sit in as an observer in sessions at which the evidence on President Nixon's conduct in office is presented to

the committee.

If formally adopted by the committee, the proposal could prevent any widening of a partisan split that has been developing during the last few days as Democrats and Republicans on the committee debated the President's right of representation.

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