

Nixon's Big Gamble

A Fight to Survive

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President Nixon launched last night the strongest counterattack so far in his long struggle to survive Watergate. The documents he has decided to release, he conceded, were ambiguous and in some cases damaging.

But he asserted they

would demonstrate that "the President has nothing to hide." and it seemed clear from the atmosphere at the White House that he and his senior aides believed the latest effort would bring him victory.

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Analysis

The President's senior

staff clearly expects victory.

In the hours before Mr. Nixon began speaking, the private comments of those in positions of authority rang with self-confidence — and for the first time in months, the aides appeared to mean what they said.

There were two main reasons for this.

First, the acquittal Sunday

of John N. Mitchell and Maurice H. Stans in their conspiracy trial in New York, and the declaration of the jury foreman that the testimony of John W. Dean III was "often unbelievable," encouraged Mr. Nixon's supporters to believe that they could destroy the credibility of the man whose testimony has most heavily damaged the President.

Second, Mr. Nixon's decision to make public the transcripts of dozens of conver-

sations — more than 1200 pages in all — indicated to his admirers that at last Mr. Nixon was willing to run great risks to win a great victory, something many of them have privately begged him to do for months.

Vice President Gerald Ford stated the administration view in a television interview last night. The result of the trial, he said, means that "Mr. Dean's credibility is somewhat lessened." The transcripts, he added, "will further erode" his credibility.

More of the same can be expected in the next two weeks, as the President speaks in Washington, Phoenix, Ariz., Spokane, Wash., and Stillwater, Okla.

Whether Mr. Nixon will succeed, after so many past failures, in arresting the precipitous decline in his fortunes, will not be clear until the transcripts have been studied and weighed against other evidence.

But there were few in Washington last night who were unwilling to concede that the President had made his most powerful Watergate defense since the scandal broke.

On one level, Mr. Nixon sought to placate the House Judiciary Committee and to avoid a constitutional confrontation by responding in part to its subpoena for tape recordings to be used in its impeachment inquiry.

But he did not give the committee what it demanded — the tapes themselves, rather than partial transcripts — and Democratic committee members and at least some of the Republicans seemed unlikely to be mollified by Mr. Nixon's offer to let the two ranking members come to the White House to compare the originals with the transcripts.

The President anticipated possible anger by appealing to a larger audience, the American public. He was placing his confidence, he said, "in the basic fairness of the American people" and to that end releasing the transcripts to them as well as to the Judiciary Commit-

That was the principal reason, apparently, that Mr. Nixon resisted so long the idea of releasing the tapes. He is not a man who will enjoy having his "brutal candor" and private musings spread on the public record; he is not a man who enjoys being ridiculed.

But in the end he clearly decided that his survival required no less.