

Mr. Nixon On the Barricades

By James Reston

WASHINGTON, April 30—In the great crises of his political life, Richard Nixon has been almost recklessly bold. He saves himself from charges of corruption in the Presidential campaign of 1952 with his Checkers speech. He came back after losing the Presidency of 1960 and the governorship of California in 1962, and the guess here is that he has helped himself by his latest TV defense against impeachment and conviction.

As in 1952, he appealed in his latest TV performance to the people over the heads of the politicians. His fate lies, first, with the Judiciary Committee of the House, then with the opinion of the House itself, and finally, if he cannot persuade them, with the judgment of the Senate. But he did not give the Judiciary Committee the evidence it had subpoenaed. He gave them that part of the evidence he thought they should have, and interpreted it selectively in his TV address to the nation before the Judiciary Committee had even had a chance to read the partial evidence he had provided.

More than that, he challenged the Congress to decide what facts they needed to carry out their constitutional responsibilities in the impeachment process, and even insisted on who should verify the evidence he had made available.

In short, he asked the people and the Congress to trust him, but refused to trust the Judiciary Committee or its lawyers to hear the tapes on which his argument was based. Also, he concentrated his attack on the testimony of John Dean, the main witness against him, though he must have known that Mr. Dean was forbidden by the courts to answer back.

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All this was presented by the President to the nation as an exercise of unprecedented generosity. No President in the history of the Republic he said had ever made available to the Congress or the people so many secret conversations within the White House, which is true. No doubt, he added, these documents would be misconstrued by his opponents in the Congress and the press, but he had always sought to do what was right, and now all these thousands of documents would be published, and if anybody had any doubt, the chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, Peter Rodino Jr., of New Jersey, and the senior Republican member of the committee, Edward Hutchinson of Michigan could listen to the tapes and confirm whether or not he was telling the truth.

It is odd that such a speech should have to be made in America by the President of the United States, and even tragic that he felt he had to say, if you don't believe all this, you can check it against the record. But still this was probably the most powerful and effective political speech Mr. Nixon has ever made.

Seen from Capitol Hill it was a clever, almost an outrageous speech. For if the Congress agreed with it, the House and the Senate would be saying that, even in an impeachment proceeding, the President should be able to select the evidence and the people who should check and confirm it.

Nevertheless, as seen by the television audience, the President's main target, it was probably an effective and even brilliant political performance. Here is all the relevant evidence, he said. It will prove my fairness and innocence. Here behind me are volumes of testimony. Let the Congress and the people study them, and if they have any doubt, let Messrs. Rodino and Hutchinson of the Judiciary Committee listen to them and raise questions, and I will answer them under oath. But not, he insisted, the rest of the Judiciary Committee, and not the lawyers of the committee or its staff.

No doubt this sounded fine to the television audience, but imagine Messrs. Rodino and Hutchinson, without lawyers or staff, trying to go through dozens of tapes on hundreds of intricate questions, while still trying to preside over the proceedings of the Judiciary Committee and whatever else is going on in the House of Representatives. Even if the President's invitation were reasonable, it would take months of listening and months more of questioning.

Meanwhile, the other members of the Judiciary Committee will be complaining that they have been tricked and left out of hearing the evidence, and the controversy will not be resolved, as the President predicted, but will become even more complicated and vindictive than before.

This is the chance the President took—maybe the boldest of his career—but it may work. Like Maurice Stans and John Mitchell, the President's problem is to prove that there is a "reasonable doubt" that he knew about the scandals of 1972 or tried to cover them up.

And by releasing all these volumes of testimony and going to the people with his evidence and his appeals to get all this behind us and get on to the battle against war and inflation, he has probably gained considerable support in the country and some votes in the Congress.

Mr. Nixon is probably wrong in supposing that his speech and his pile of documents will end the controversy, but he has released enough to create "reasonable doubt" and that may be decisive in his favor at the end.