

Republican Loyalty: How Long Will It

A dogged streak of loyalty, deeply imbedded in the Republican ethic and now relied on for President Nixon's salvation in the face of possibly incriminating tapes, surfaced Monday when Rep. John Rhodes of Arizona was approached on the House floor by a worried Republican colleague.

Rhodes, the savvy House Republican leader, has long proposed that senior members of the House Judiciary Committee and their staff lawyers be allowed to authenticate the tapes. Having heard reports (which proved correct) that the President that night would bar committee lawyers from hearing the tapes, the worried colleague commiserated with Rhodes about the corruption of his plan. Rhode's reply was courteous but firm: Don't criticize the President tonight; praise him.

In fact, neither Rhodes nor the overwhelming majority of Republican congressmen flinched at the eighth of a loaf offered by Mr. Nixon. To the amazement of outsiders, they applauded the President's defiance of the subpoena and his offer of only a portion of the evidence sought by the impeachment proceedings.

Since the House Democratic majority is not likely to impeach the President on a straight party-line vote, such Republican loyalty could conceivably save Mr. Nixon. Thus, the big question: will it endure in spite of damaging evidence in the President's own taped words and his overall noncooperation with impeachment investigators?

Continued blind loyalty would seem improbable were it not for the remarkable flipflop of the Judiciary Committee's Republicans during just one week. In their April 23 caucus, they seemed unwilling to accept anything less than the actual tapes demanded in the subpoena.

One reason for this hard posture was the confidential report given them that day by Albert Jenner, their counsel for the impeachment proceedings. After listening to tapes in the committee's possession, Jenner reported that they revealed significant omissions and errors in White House transcripts. Nobody was charging fraud—just a matter of vastly more sophisticated equipment at the Judiciary Committee.



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Thus, Republicans left the committee meeting nearly as adamant as Democrats. They wanted nothing less than the Rhodes formula for authenticating tapes, insisted on technical experts examining the tapes and wanted to hear relevant portions with their own ears.

The "compromise" hawked to the na-

tion Monday night by the President satisfied none of these conditions. The committee's senior Democrat and Republican—Reps. Peter Rodino of New Jersey and Edward Hutchinson of Michigan—have neither the time nor voluminous knowledge of the Watergate scandal to effectively authenticate the tapes.

Last?

Even worse is what was left unmentioned by the President. No technical experts can touch the tapes. As for tapes requested for non-Watergate scandals (milk fund and ITT) that are part of impeachment proceedings, the White House will yield nothing.

Yet of 17 Judiciary Committee Republicans, only Reps. Hamilton Fish of New York and William Cohen of Maine (and to a lesser extent Thomas Railsback of Illinois) publicly criticized the Nixon formula. The rest, like most other Republican congressmen, praised the President for showing some signs of cooperation.

Indeed, those few Republicans who dared express misgivings about the presidential speech encountered blistering sarcasm on the House floor

Tuesday. The newspaper clipping of a recent Texas speech by Jenner critical of Mr. Nixon was tacked to the Republican cloakroom bulletin board. To many Republicans, Jenner's criticism of the President was more impeachable than Mr. Nixon's defiance of the subpoena.

But Republicans have a lot more to swallow. Thanks to Model-T White House equipment, the transcripts are filled with elisions marked "inaudible" and "unintelligible." Far worse are some of the audible and intelligible statements, particularly Mr. Nixon's indication to John W. Dean III on March 21, 1973, that paying hush money was "the prime thing that you damn well better get done."

These congressmen are now getting their glimpse, through incomplete edited transcripts, of Oval Office conversations that caused a grand jury to indict the President's top lieutenants and then send the evidence to the impeachment proceedings. According to some analysts, the tapes support Dean's accusations far more than they contradict them.

Thus, Mr. Nixon may be asking too much of his Republican congressmen. Those who swallowed whole the President's Monday night speech may have offered the last blind show of that dogged Republican loyalty.