

Nixon Strategy Viewed as Seeking Divisions

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WASHINGTON, May 2 — President Nixon has reaped the first harvest of his latest Watergate strategy. Simply stated, according to White House officials who participated in the decision to make public edited transcripts of Presidential tape recordings, that strategy is to divide on partisan and ideological grounds. Divide the House Judiciary Committee, which is weighing impeachment. Divide the Congress, which will ultimately determine the President's fate. Divide the body politic, which will influence the decisions in Washington.

News Analysis

The 20-to-18 vote last night in the committee, by which the panel decided to reject Mr. Nixon's delivery of transcripts rather than copies of the original tapes, indicated that the President had succeeded, for the moment at least, in polarizing the committee. In the vote, two Democrats sided with the minority because they felt the motion adopted was too weak. One Republican voted with the majority.

The committee chairman, Representative Peter W. Rodino Jr. of New Jersey, a Democrat, had labored for weeks to prevent any such polarization from occurring.

In addition, the comments of such prominent Republicans as Vice President Ford; Hugh Scott of Pennsylvania, the Republican minority leader in the Senate, and John J. Rhodes of Arizona, the Republican minority leader in the House—all favorable to Mr. Nixon—demonstrated that the President had at least temporarily stanch-

the hemorrhage in his Republican support on Capitol Hill.

Those familiar with the President's thinking acknowledge that he found himself, as he deliberated last weekend, in an extraordinarily difficult situation. If he failed to give the committee anything, he would add, in all probability, another count to its list of grounds for impeachment. Moreover, he would risk the defection of more onetime Nixon loyalists on the ground that he was unwilling to state his case fully to the nation.

Full of Contradiction

The problem was not only, as Mr. Nixon stated it in his television address Monday night, that much in the edited transcripts was embarrassing and would subject him to ridicule. It was also that the 1,200-odd pages—full of ambiguity and elliptical language, of contradiction and changes of context, of special pleading—were capable of varying interpretations even by disinterested persons.

On March 21, 1973, for example, Richard Nixon told John W. Dean 3d that hush money should be paid forthwith; on April 16 he told him to tell the truth no matter what the consequences. The contradictions occur even in the same conversation, even in Mr. Nixon's assessment of the same man (Mr. Dean, for instance), even in his day-to-day ideas for solving the same problems.

For that reason, Mr. Nixon resisted for months the idea of releasing the transcripts. But finally, his supporters say, he decided that those eager to believe him and support him—Republicans, for the most part,

and Democratic conservatives—had to have something on which to base their support, however problematical it was.

So for the first time in perhaps a dozen efforts to regain the initiative in the Watergate case, Mr. Nixon decided to gamble. In the following ways he gambled that:

¶Providing the transcripts rather than the copies of the tapes would shake the bipartisan near-unity on the Judiciary Committee, which its leaders consider essential to mustering support for its position later on the House floor;

¶Abandoning his long insistence that the tapes were privileged would persuade his constituency in the Congress and in the country, as he himself put it, that "The President has nothing to hide;"

¶None of the admittedly damaging material in the transcripts would make a sufficient impression on the busy lawmakers and the busy public to overwhelm the legal argument, based on a careful selection of material from the transcripts, that was prepared by James D. St. Clair, Mr. Nixon's counsel.

Out of these goals, the Presidential associates said, grew the plan for the television speech, which enabled Mr. Nixon to appear magnanimous and to draw his own conclusions from the transcripts before they were public, and also the decision to release Mr. St. Clair's summary hours before issuing the transcripts.

Banking on Speech

Ever eager to seize the public relations initiative, as the transcripts show, the White House knew that the speech and the St. Clair summary would lend themselves far more easily to

journalistic treatment than the inchoate mass of transcripts.

Ultimately, however, the words in the transcripts—and perhaps the tapes themselves—will be decisive. The picture of Richard Nixon contained therein will percolate into the public mind, and the picture of his actions will be judged by the committee, its staff and the Congress.

If the committee decides that the picture justifies impeachment, the partisan split is likely to evaporate; the Republican minority made it clear last night that it was prepared to press the President further if their reading of the transcripts seemed to justify it. And if the country is repelled by the picture of Mr. Nixon that it perceives, however dimly, it is unlikely to be of much real benefit to the President.

Series of Trials

Furthermore, there are other still unresolved issues unlikely to redound to Mr. Nixon's credit: the subpoena from the special prosecutor, Leon Jaworski; the committee's bid for additional documents; the long series of forthcoming trials; the report on the 18-½ minute gap in one of the most crucial of all the tapes.

The President counted for months on defending himself by making public as little as possible. As Mr. St. Clair made clear yesterday, Mr. Nixon still has no intention of making everything public. But he has divulged a good deal, apparently hoping that it will be enough to persuade his supporters to give him the benefit of the doubt, and that there will be enough of them to preserve his Administration until 1977.