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A Solemn Pledge to The Nation

Washington

The House Judiciary Committee began examining in secret yesterday the evidence that may ultimately lead to a judgment of President Nixon's fitness to serve out his second term.

The impeachment hearings, the second in the nation's history to involve a President, began with an austere 18-minute public pledge by the committee's leaders to use the "awesome" impeachment power wisely.

Then the committee quickly went into a closed three-hour session during which it heard a recitation of the events that led up to the burglary of the Democratic headquarters in the Watergate complex on June 17, 1972.

The investigation of that burglary and of the attempt to cover it up led to resignations of high Nixon administration officials, criminal charges against some of them and, ultimately, to the hearings yesterday.

Committee lawyers gave each of the panel's 38 members, as well as Mr. Nixon's chief defense attorney, James D. St. Clair, two thick binders.

One contained an index of the massive amounts of evidence accumulated in six months of investigation of allegations of wrongdoing by Mr. Nixon. The second, labeled "Notebook No. 1," listed two statements of fact outlined to the members yesterday and the documents and testimony supporting the findings.

If a simple majority of the committee—composed of 21 Democrats and 17 Republicans—approves articles of impeachment, the matter is referred to the House floor for consideration by all 435 members.

If a simple majority of the House votes to impeach, a

trial will be held in the Senate where a two-thirds vote—

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67 of the 100 senators—will be required for conviction.

"We understand our high constitutional responsibility. We will faithfully live up to it," the committee chairman, Representative Peter W. Rodino Jr. (Dem-N.J.), intoned to a national television audience moments after rapping a gavel six times to start the historic hearings.

"For some time," Rodino added, "We have known that the real security of this nation lies in the integrity of its institutions and the trust and informed confidence of its people. We conduct our deliberations in that spirit."

The ranking Republican, Representative Edward Hutchinson of Michigan, echoed the tone set by Rodino.

"The power of impeachment is one of those great checks and balances written in our Constitution to ameliorate the stark doctrine of the separation of powers. But impeachment of a President is most drastic, for it can bring down an administration of the government," he said.

Hutchinson, citing a 1776 British law dictionary, emphasized his belief that the Constitution's provision for impeachment on grounds of "treason, bribery or other high crimes and misdemeanors" means that to impeach Mr. Nixon the committee must find "criminal culpability on the part of the President himself, measured according to criminal law."

Although Rodino's statement did not address that point, he and many other members of the committee have said that they do not believe that they must necessarily find criminal culpability in order to vote for impeachment. They maintain that the President could be impeached on much broader grounds if the totality of misconduct is serious enough and subverts the constitution.

St. Clair played no role in the day's proceedings other

than to listen and to pledge, during the private portion of the briefing, that he would abide by the committee's rules of secrecy and procedure.

Just before the hearings began, however, St. Clair told newsmen that he was confident Mr. Nixon would survive the test of the evidence brought before the committee.

"The President will not be impeached," he predicted. "The House of Representatives will not impeach."

As described by Rodino, following the closed-door meeting, The material presented this afternoon to the 21 Democrats and 17 Republicans on the panel merely set the stage for the serious issues to be examined later.

Rodino said that John M. Doar, the committee's special counsel, had read a memorandum outlining the relationship between the upper echelons of the White House and the leaders of the President's 1972 re-election campaign.

In addition, the committee staff presented documents and testimony bearing on the planning, by agents of the President's 1972 campaign, for the political intelligence-gathering operation that came to grief at the June 17, 1972, Watergate break-in.

"Doar strung the facts out like a string of beads," one Democrat said later. "I've heard nearly all of it before, but not in such detail and such precise chronology."

The committee member said that "the stuff today stopped at the Oval Office" of the President, but that it had whetted his appetite to hear the tapes of conversations involving Mr. Nixon after the Watergate break-in.

Each of the committee members and lawyers was bound, as was St. Clair, to keep secret all of the evidence submitted privately.

St. Clair told newsmen he would report "regularly" to the President, but he declined to answer substantive questions.

Rodino said that under the panel's rules of confidentiality Mr. Nixon was "the only

person to whom (St. Clair) can talk" about the secret proceedings.

Although committee officials had feared that information about the proceedings would seep into public print, most of the members said late yesterday that they would not violate the rules of secrecy but that they saw nothing secret in yesterday's evidence.

"It's been reported a hundred times before," said Representative John Conyers Jr. (Dem-Mich.).

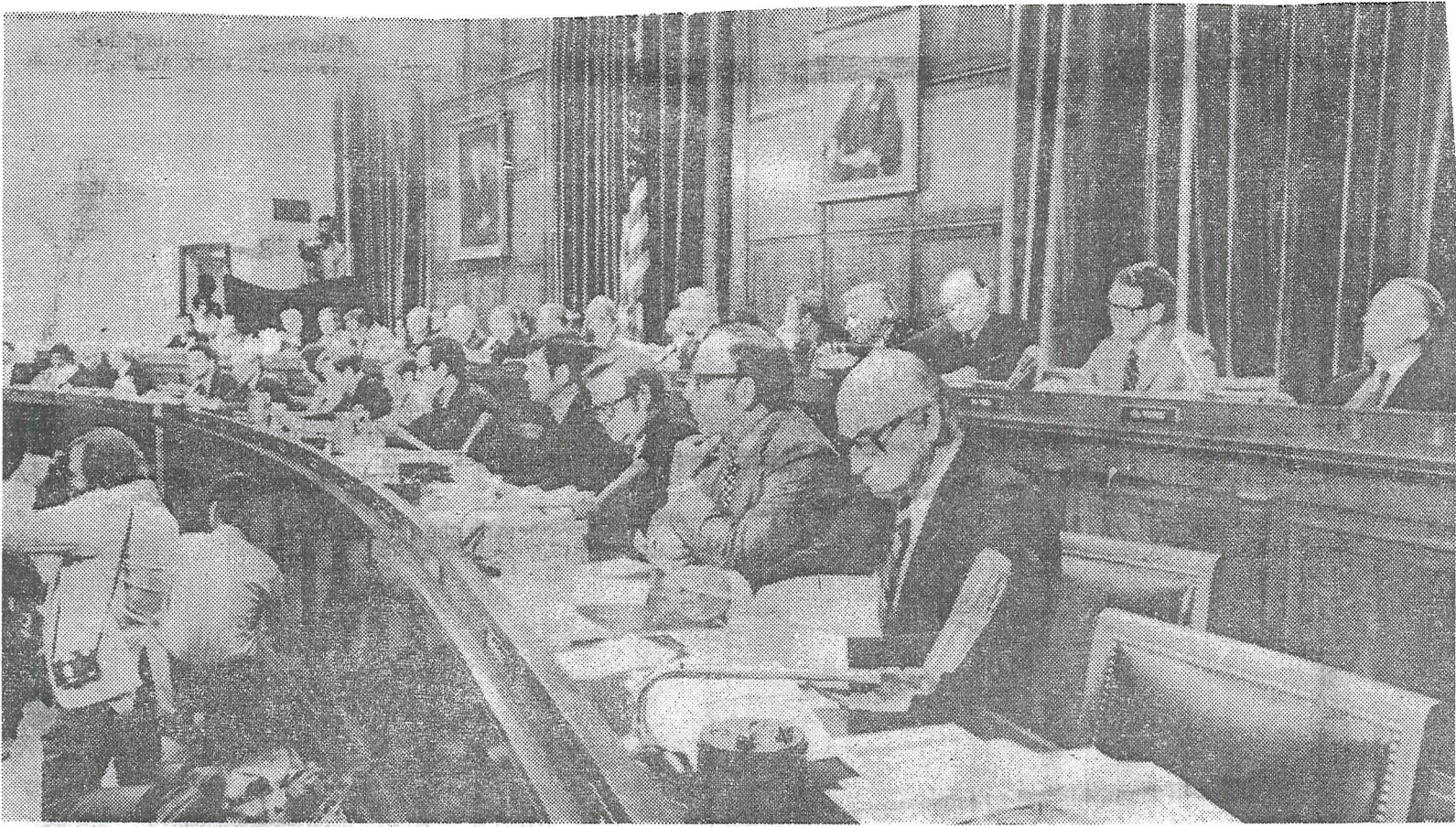
Still, when he returned to his office, Conyers locked the two binders of confidential material in a safe normally filled only with a small stock of liquor.

St. Clair appeared untroubled by what he had heard so far. He was asked if he was relieved to have the first day of hearings completed and replied, in a nonchalant manner: "It's always nice to get started."

Moments later, however, he quipped:

"I'd rather be in Boston practicing law."

New York Times



The House Judiciary Committee yesterday as it opened its impeachment inquiry with a public session

AP Wirephoto



UPI Telephoto

HOUSE JUDICIARY CHAIRMAN PETER RODINO
He banged the gavel, and the inquiry opened