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Judgment Day

By William V. Shannon

WASHINGTON, July 15—It is like watching a slow avalanche.

Two years ago this month John N. Mitchell resigned as head of the Committee for the Re-Election of the President immediately after a committee aide was tied to the Watergate burglary.

One year ago this week Alexander Butterfield testified before the Senate Watergate committee that all of Mr. Nixon's conversations were automatically recorded on tape.

Nine months ago this week, President Nixon fired Archibald Cox and tried to abolish the office of special prosecutor. Six months ago, he concluded his State of the Union Message with the cry, "One year of Watergate is enough." Four months ago, he was named as an unindicted co-conspirator by the same grand jury that indicted seven of his former aides on obstruction of justice charges.

Two months ago, he moved to quash a subpoena for 64 additional tapes for possible use in that forthcoming trial. A decision by the Supreme Court is expected any day.

The avalanche of judgment on this huge mass of crimes and lies has been rumbling down from the mountain top for so long that many people have begun to doubt that it would ever reach Mr. Nixon and sweep his Administration away.

Over precipices and across valleys, the avalanche has roared. It grows sometimes louder, sometimes fainter.

John Mitchell and Maurice Stans are exonerated in a trial in New York, and for a few days, the avalanche seems further away from the capital and less ominous for Mr. Nixon. John Ehrlichman is convicted in another trial and the rumbling is louder and closer.

James D. St. Clair rushes about trying to organize defenses. Senator Barry Goldwater and Representative John Rhodes, the two guardians of the desert-pure conservative faith, conduct intermittent dialogues in public places as to whether to save Mr. Nixon or abandon him when the avalanche finally crashes through the White House door.

Mr. Nixon meanwhile withdraws for long periods, journeys abroad in search of foreign help, makes ceremonial appearances in the capital to show that, photographically at least, he is still presiding over a Government, and then withdraws again. For more than a year, his routine has been one of Florida and California vacations fitfully disturbed by bits of work. As he tries to show his unconcern about the grim rumbling so plainly heard in the streets of the capital, Washington takes on the disconnected unreal atmosphere of the capital of Laos or Cambodia where terrible sounds are always rumbling in

the distance and where everything is so desperate that nothing is serious.

But the legal defenses, the dialogues of the elders, the parade of unconcern can avail nothing. Despite the tricks that sounds play on the human ear, the avalanche of judgment has been moving steadily, inexorably nearer to the President for the entire year since the truthful Mr. Butterfield disclosed the existence of the tapes.

Only if the President on the night of that fateful disclosure had summoned up the ruthlessness to destroy every last one of the tapes might he have been able to brazen his way to safety. It would hardly have mattered what excuse he offered for destroying all the tapes — national security, concern for the feelings of foreign visitors, respect for privacy, anything.

Once the tapes were gone, no one on the outside would have dreamed that his conversations were as incriminating as they have proved to be. Unless one of the other insiders — H. R. Haldeman, John Ehrlichman, John Mitchell — broke and corroborated John W. Dean's testimony, it would have been extremely difficult for the prosecutors to show Mr. Nixon's deep involvement.

The swift destruction of the tapes would have required great audacity. Mr. Nixon is capable of such audacity but he was not capable of it fast enough on that night a year ago when his secret became known. The obscure impulse deep within his psyche that compelled him to allow the reels of tape to go winding on as everything began to fall apart in the spring of 1973, the same impulse that later caused him to finger the tapes lovingly, play them over and recount some of their contents to Ron Ziegler even as the Watergate hearings began and danger mounted, that same impulse stayed his hand.

He procrastinated and was lost. Firing Archibald Cox and causing—or allowing to be caused—mysterious erasures and buzzings in certain tapes were inadequate substitutes for that swift act of nihilism he failed to perform.

The President could not survive the disclosure of any of his private conversations because they all serve to show that Watergate was a characteristic act of the Nixon regime rather than an aberration. He and his closest associates regarded the White House as an impenetrable shield behind which they could safely do anything. All they needed, they thought, were secret taping devices to keep tabs on one another and a public relations scenario to beguile the public.

As the day draws closer when he scores another historic first and becomes the first President to be impeached and convicted, Mr. Nixon has one consolation. It has been the longest, best-recorded avalanche in history.