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Beyond P.R.

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As the House Judiciary Committee continues its formal release of the massive volume of evidence it has developed in the impeachment inquiry, new public relations lines have begun to emerge from the White House. The President's aides are now arguing that Mr. Nixon is being denied due process, while James D. St. Clair busily fans the mystery of Mr. Nixon's intentions if the Supreme Court rules against him on the subpoenas issue.

The outline of the due-process argument began to develop several weeks ago when White House spokesmen started to charge the Judiciary Committee with character assassination and to describe it as a "partisan lynch mob." Last week, Ronald Ziegler accused the committee of releasing the evidence selectively in an effort to turn public opinion against the President. Now, White House aides are talking darkly about an "impeachment lobby" motivated solely by hatred of Mr. Nixon.

The first thing to be noted about that approach is that impeachment and removal are partially political and partly judicial processes. The Constitution assigned the tasks of investigation, bringing the charges and trying the facts to politicians operating in the political arena. Considering that fact and deplorable as some of the leaks have been, the Judiciary Committee's efforts to date have been commendably disciplined. The committee's leadership and its staff have exerted every effort to keep this highly charged issue as nonpartisan as possible and, to a remarkable degree, they have succeeded.

The St. Clair ploy is even more fascinating. It has been suggested by at least one columnist friendly to the White House that the intention is to create uncertainty about Mr. Nixon's reaction to an adverse Supreme Court decision in order to seduce commentators to thunder that Mr. Nixon should be impeached if he does not comply. His subsequent compliance would then create a reaction in his favor, thus undercutting the advocates of impeachment.

But this strategy overlooks the fact that the American public assumes that Mr. Nixon will obey an order of the Supreme Court, as every other citizen would be bound to do. He will get no special credit for obeying such an order; and his failure to do so would merely be an additional ground for impeachment.

As the ratchet turns and the full extent of the evidence against the President is made public, it becomes increasingly clear that Mr. Nixon cannot be saved by a public relations campaign, no matter how devious. He and his defenders will have to deal with the evidence. The sooner they realize that and begin to do so, the better it will be for everybody.