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Majority Switches, Gets to Specifics

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Stung by their own sloppy video performance, the Judiciary Committee's impeachment majority put together their own public relations plan in a series of caucuses yesterday and began broadcasting hour-after-hour of evidence against the President.

"What a difference 24 hours make," said Rep. Charles A. Sandman (R-N.J.), and, for once, no one disagreed with the feisty Nixon defender.

All day Friday, the 26 or 27 members who expect to vote for impeachment had been spun off balance by the pro-Nixon minority's fusillade of demands for specific facts to back up the Watergate cover-up charge.

For three months they had been saturated with evidence, names and dates,

snatches of Oval Office conversations, a veritable mountain of interlocking events.

But it suddenly dawned on them that the folks back home watching television maybe didn't grasp that.

"We're talking about impeaching the President," said Rep. Walter Flowers, a swing vote from Tuscaloosa, Ala., "and you can't do that on pious platitudes. You've got to zap it out there."

Flowers, a Democratic moderate, was one of the bipartisan group of junior committee members who met yesterday morning and resolved to take things back in hand.

In short order, they agreed to support a major substantive amendment that

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one of their number, Rep. Tom Railsback (R-Ill.), had drafted in an effort to dispell the vagueness surrounding the supposed "strategy" of the Watergate cover-up. And they agreed on a public relations plan to dramatize the wealth of evidence to support that charge.

So when the committee resumed yesterday a bit past noon, six or eight of the pro-impeachment congressmen put on a show of their own — elaborating bing-bing-bing the evidence they believe supports impeachment.

"Fundamental fairness requires that we articulate the case," said Rep. William Cohen, the Maine Republican. In part, he and the others want to lay out a record for the debate which lies ahead in the House of Representatives. But they also intended to show voters across the nation that the case is there.

In a morning caucus, a group of six passed out assignments on who would covers what areas. They were equipped with back-up summaries cranked out overnight by chief counsel John Doar and his staff, a recital of 60 different events which support the 10 specifications in the so-called Watergate cover-up case against Mr. Nixon.

Hogan of Maryland, Cohen of Maine, Ellberg of Pennsylvania, Seiberling of Ohio and others plowed once more through the now-familiar details of significant presidential remarks

and silences. Repeatedly, they said "specifically" that such an individual did or said such a thing on such-and-such a day.

All of a sudden, Charlie Sandman had heard enough. "There's no point in continuing this kind of argument," he said. "Let's not bore the American people to death."

Off camera, Sandman suggested the sparring was primarily for purposes of popular consumption anyway. "The 27 votes is like the rock of Gibraltar," he said with some exaggeration. "There's no way the outcome of this vote is going to be changed by debate, so let's get on with it."

Rep. Lawrence J. Hogan of Maryland twitted his fellow Republican for shifting his ground.

"It seems the gentleman from New Jersey is trying to carry water on both shoulders," Hogan said. "He subjected all of us yesterday to belabored arguments on the need for specificity. He convinced a number of us that he is right . . . so we're trying to be responsive and specifically support every item in the impeachment article."

Behind the video performances, however, there was a genuine problem which Sandman and his fellow Republican critics, Wiggins of California and Dennis of Indiana, forced into the open. The members for impeachment had to acknowledge that they do not all agree among themselves on a crucial element — the time when the Presi-

dent allegedly joined the cover-up plot.

Most of the pro-impeachment Democrats, for instance, seem to accept the John Doar theory that Richard M. Nixon became an active participant and director in the Watergate cover-up just a few days after the break-in. A smaller group—including important Republican swing votes—is not satisfied that the evidence shows that but they are convinced that the President was in the plot at least by the time of crucial meetings in March when John W. Dean III laid out the sordid facts for him.

As the opposition pressed to know when, exactly, the cover-up strategy began for the President, it became clear that this disagreement weakened the case. So, yesterday, Railsback, the Illinois Republican, proposed an amendment which broadened the focus of the charge by describing the President's "pattern of conduct" rather than his "policy." It was approved by an almost-unanimous voice vote.

In the normal course of legislative mark-ups, a lot of the needling from the opposition would be quickly shut off—but the Democratic majority feared that might seem heavy-handed to the viewing audience.

"The public is not equipped to understand the parliamentary necessity of cutting off repetitive or cumulative debate," said Rep. James Mann, the South Carolina Democrat, who has played a key role in drafting the impeachment articles.

Mann opposed televised hearings for that very reason. "TV is sexy politically and it's going to put our deliberative process into a structure that does not lend itself to deliberation, editing, thinking out loud," Mann complained.

But the long recitals of background evidence yesterday and Friday did have one happy result for the politicians on the Judiciary Committee—it delayed the climactic moment of actually voting on an article of impeachment until yesterday evening, when so many million Americans are in front of their TV sets.

Rep. Don Edwards thought, too, that TV really improved the proceedings in some ways, perhaps even speeded things up and reduced the rancor.

"We didn't look too good," Edwards said of the Friday debate. "All of a sudden we realized that. With 50 million people watching, we didn't want to bore them to death."

Meanwhile, Congressman Sandman was savoring the new fame won by his TV performance.

"The first day we had 2,000 telegrams, less than 100 unfriendly," Sandman said enthusiastically. "We've had more than 1,000 letters a day."

But how will he feel if his arguments fail and Richard Nixon is actually removed from office? Charlie Sandman answered with a broad grin and a clap on the back.

"Jerry Ford will be a great President," he said enthusiastically.