

Mr. Nixon: Shifting

Belatedly aware that their hard-line defense has failed to impede certain impeachment by the House, President Nixon's strategists are moving toward an eleventh-hour tactical shift: a soft-line undermining of the impeachment case's factual foundation for use in the Senate trial.

With pessimism saturating the White House, the enormity of Oval Office miscalculation is sinking in. The Nixon White House, as so often before, completely misread political footprints other politicians understood for months. Mr. Nixon's most trusted supporters in the House have informed him he is irrevocably dead there, an assessment concurred in by presidential assistants.

Thus, the trauma of the nationally televised proceedings has resulted in two White House reassessments: first, Mr. Nixon's strength among House Republicans and Southern Democrats has suddenly evaporated; second, the President's strident counterattack strategy has been exposed as counterproductive.

That means tentative White House strategy at least in the immediate future will be relatively nonflamboyant. By contending the factual case against him is vague, Nixon strategists hope to keep the anti-Nixon margin in the House as low as possible and build a case for the Senate. But there is no longer certainty Mr. Nixon can pick up the one-third plus one votes needed in the Senate.

Such a somber view of Mr. Nixon's prospects resulted from televised proceedings smashing the dream world at the White House. Although an impeachment vote by the House Judiciary Committee has long been expected, the Nixon camp was stunned by its size, the identity of some pro-impeachment Republicans and, particularly, the overwhelmingly favorable impression of the proceedings given the nation over television.

Specifically, the vote for impeachment by Rep. Walter Flowers, an Alabama conservative Democrat, crumpled Nixonite hopes of a steadfast Dixie bloc. "He hurt us bad," admits Rep. G. V. (Sonny) Montgomery of Mississippi, the President's most vocal Southern Democratic supporter. Instead of 40 Southern Democrats supporting him, the President may have only half that number.

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His Strategy



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The Republican situation is worse. House Minority Leader John Rhodes of Arizona almost surely will vote against impeachment. However, a rising House Republican leader—Rep. Barber Conable of New York, chairman of the GOP policy committee—could start a Republican stampede toward impeachment.

Conable has been shaken by charges that President Nixon tried to subvert the Internal Revenue Service. While believing his upstate Republican constituency opposes impeachment, he is determined to vote strictly on the basis of evidence. If so loyal a Nixon administration supporter as Conable defects, well in excess of 50 Republicans could follow.

This grim prognosis suggests to some presidential aides that fighting impeachment by counterattacking has proved calamitous. Press Secretary Ronald Ziegler's rushing from the President's office to damn the Judiciary Committee as a "Kangaroo Court"

was deeply resented by White House colleagues. "We have to keep that (expletive) bigmouth Ziegler shut up," one senior aide told us.

Moreover, some presidential assistants belatedly feel Mr. Nixon's defense should not follow the partisan emotionalism of New Jersey's Rep. Charles Sandman. Their model is the legalistic, reasoned defense by Rep. Charles Wiggins of California.

White House aides privately talking of Mr. Nixon taking national television time to defend himself are hoping he would not follow his normal passions into a tirade against his enemies. Rather, they hope that he would analyze and refute the 50 "incidents" listed by committee counsel John Doar as justifying impeachment. While that will not prevent impeachment by the House, the White House desperately hopes it might help in the Senate trial.

Two other options are open to the President. One is resignation, but scarcely anybody in Congress now

urges that course. For example, Rep. John Anderson of Illinois, chairman of the House Republican Conference, was berated last spring when he suggested resignation and will not repeat that recommendation today.

The other option was offered weeks ago by another member of the Republican leadership: Rep. Louis Frey of Florida, chairman of the Research Committee. Frey urged that the President request the House to send articles of impeachment quickly and without debate to the Senate so he might have a fair trial. It was summarily rejected by the White House as a gimmick to take congressmen off the hook, a view that surely remains unchanged.

Time and options are running out in the view of the White House. The projected shift to a primarily legal rather than wholly political defense for the Senate trial may be the best way left open for preservation of the Nixon presidency.

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