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Nixon Strategy on Impeachment

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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Aug. 1—At the Nixon White House a favorite saying is "Skip the details and examine the bottom line for the real meaning." The bottom line of statements emanating from the President's aides this week is that Mr. Nixon has made some serious tactical errors in his efforts to avoid impeachment, has few options left to exercise and is still searching for a new strategy.

With his long history of launching counterattacks against his enemies, it seems unrealistic to assume that Mr. Nixon will continue to sit silently and let events take their course, as he has been doing the last few days. Yet at present he is projecting the image of a helpless giant, unable to make effective use of the unlimited television time and enormous resources at his command.

Results of the Polls

The options that are open to him — an extended television appearance, personal appeals to members of Congress, a campaign to make it appear unpatriotic to impeach a President—have all been tried over and over but have failed to lift him out of the Watergate quagmire.

Even his generally acclaimed foreign trips of earlier this summer — usually a sure means for a President to gain a few points in the public opinion polls — did not help his public standing. A Gallup Poll, taken July 12-15, a few days after he returned from the Soviet Union and the summit meeting with Leonid I. Brezhnev, showed that 24 per cent of the sample approved of his performance in office, as against 53 per cent who disapproved. A similar poll taken at the beginning of June, before Mr. Nixon's Middle Eastern tour, showed a 28 per cent approval and 61 per cent disapproval.

Rather than initiating a grand new strategy in the face of recent reversals on impeachment, the White House for the last few days has appeared to be preoccupied with correcting mistakes and reaching for small gains.

Mistake Acknowledged

One mistake now privately acknowledged by White House officials was Ronald L. Ziegler's characterization of the House Judiciary Committee as a "kangaroo court" as it voted out articles of impeachment. Mr. Ziegler was presumably voicing the President's views,

and other White House aides made similar settlements.

One effect of that tack was to anger members of Congress who must ultimately decide whether Mr. Nixon is removed from office. In an effort to heal that wound, the President's spokesmen suddenly began talking of all members of Congress in conciliatory tones, and one Presidential aide was reported to have told some Congressional leaders that Mr. Ziegler had been ordered to quit talking for the time being.

At the same time, considerable effort has been spent by the President's spokesmen to correct the impression that the White House is frequently out of touch with reality. Last Saturday night, in San Clemente, Calif., after the Judiciary Committee voted the first article of impeachment, Mr. Ziegler issued the following mimeographed statement:

"The President remains confident that the full House will recognize that there simply is not the evidence to support this or any other article of impeachment and will not vote to impeach. He is confident because he knows he has committed no impeachable offense.

A Change in Position

The White House stood by this view even after the President's defenders in the House began conceding that an impeachment vote by the full House appeared certain. Finally, yesterday, the President's spokesmen backed off from the statement but had trouble explaining how they could be doing so without conceding the President's impeachment.

Mr. Nixon's spokesman, Gerald L. Warren, explained the change today by saying the situation was "shifting and unpredictable." Gen. Alexander M. Haig Jr., the White House chief of staff, was even more restrained, saying "We are not naive," as if to explain that the White House was not once again entertaining an overly optimistic view of the President's position.

The perplexity became so pronounced that today Mr. Warren said he would no longer answer questions about strategy because it would be "unfair to the President of the United States to make pronouncements about this extremely serious situation."

"Our strategy," he said, "will become clear as events unfold in maybe 5 days, 10 days or 20 days."

Bypass Plan Rejected

Yet the uncertainty of the White House at this point was shown by reaction to a plan, advanced by a few conservative House members, to bypass House debate and take the im-

peachment case directly to the Senate for trial. Yesterday morning, Patrick J. Buchanan, a special consultant to the President, speaking on the basis of conversations with those close to the President, said that the plan was being considered in the White House, and this was confirmed by other officials.

But after Mr. Nixon's supporters in Congress strongly rejected the plan as an abdication of the House's constitutional duty, the White House reaction cooled and within 24 hours of Mr. Buchanan's statement it was considered dead.

"It was never a dominant idea around here," Mr. Warren said.

Having abandoned its efforts to picture the impeachment move as a purely partisan and political effort by members of the House Judiciary Committee, the White House was left with two previous strategies, which were still being pursued: To show that Government business was proceeding despite the impeachment move and to portray Mr. Nixon as remaining convinced that the weight of the evidence would clear him in the end.

Morton Voices Doubt

But neither seemed to be having much effect on the impeachment drive. There was talk of having Vice President Ford and Cabinet members lobby House members in behalf of the President, but there was considerable resistance to that idea.

Interior Secretary Rogers C. B. Morton told reporters today that, as to lobbying, "my old buddies" in the House, "I have some doubts about, do you help him or do you hurt him? I about have the conclusion that you come out minus." But he left the idea open.

Meantime, Mr. Nixon was continually pictured as being strangely serene, considering the circumstances. A high official who spent more than an hour with him this week said that Mr. Nixon was relaxed and optimistic "as if he had just stepped off the 18th green." And there was another round of denials that he would even consider the idea of resigning.

Yet Mr. Nixon also spent many hours this week discussing the impeachment drive with his aides and listening to tape recordings that he begun turning over to Federal District Judge John J. Sirica under orders of the Supreme Court. Today he twice canceled an appointment with his economic advisers, presumably because of his meetings on Watergate matters.

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