

# A Capital in Agony

## The Impeachment 'Monster' Is Unleashed

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In the corridors and cloakrooms of Congress, the air is filled with talk of strategies and plans and alternatives, of censure and amnesty and the orderly transfer of presidential power.

The newspapers and television broadcasts are filled with talk of the inevitability of impeachment: the monster is unleashed, the juggernaut is rolling. They are filled, too, with rumblings of deals in the winds, of confusion in the White House, and of the country's weariness of Watergate and scandal.

There are reports of "amazing" private conversations in the Senate, of massive defections from the President, of the prospect of his financial bankruptcy, of endless lawsuits to follow, of humiliating days

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as a trial witness, and of his own criminal prosecution once the deed is done.

Even his old constituency was deserting him. A Harris Survey at week's end showed a plurality of 1972 Nixon voters favoring impeachment—49 to 43 per cent. In the whole electorate, the survey showed 66 per cent favoring impeachment, 56 per cent favoring conviction by the Senate.

As a consequence of all this, some people in Congress and on the sidelines are desperately searching for a better way out.

So, too, perhaps are people at the other end of Pennsylvania Avenue — in the White House, where the alarms finally have broken through. Tempers there are frayed, the atmosphere is tense and a strange sense of presidential powerlessness prevails.

For the first time since it all began, the President last week conceded through a spokesman that the peril is real. "We face an uphill struggle . . . a political struggle," said Gerald L. Warren, the deputy press secretary. "If you had to make odds . . . you'd have to place the President in the role of the underdog."

He is cast in another role as the forces over which he now has no control rush on to a judgment—the role of the loner, wrestling by himself with the fates. He has been secluded this week in an office away from the White House, listening to his own words on yet another collection of secretly recorded tapes he must turn over to the courts and the Watergate special prosecutor in the District of Columbia for use in criminal trials still to come.

And so once again, the prospects of his resignation has entered the public dialogue.

This talk is strongly repudiated by his aides. "No, no, he won't resign," Patrick Buchanan was quoted as saying earlier this week. And Warren continued to maintain that the "constitutional processes" will yet end in vindication of the 37th President.

But the forces now arrayed against the President are of such magnitude that this rumor-filled and conspiratorial capital takes it for granted that he no longer will be able to serve as President.

The question for many now is not if, but when and how will he go?

A fortnight ago, none of this had taken form. Then, the House Judiciary Committee had yet to vote on impeachment. The President was in California, confident, his aides insisted, that he would not be impeached.

Then the hammer blows began. The Supreme Court, in a decision read by the man he had appointed as chief justice, unanimously ruled against him. A Republican member of the House Judiciary Committee—Lawrence J. Hogan—defected to the impeachers. Later that evening Americans saw on television 38 men and women of the House Judiciary Committee giving their personal views on his presidential conduct.

The most devastating portrait that emerged from that televised scene was not the defections of the Republicans and Southern Democrats. It was the way the President's strongest supporters described him. They were defending him largely in narrow, legalistic terms, not on moral grounds.

Indeed, they frankly acknowledged that serious wrongdoing had occurred in the Nixon White House and that it had been committed in the President's name if not with his personal knowledge.

While he was still in California the first impeachment article was voted, and the Gallup Poll taken before that vote reported that his standing with the American

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public had fallen to its lowest point. Only 24 per cent thought he was doing an acceptable job as President.

There were conflicting reports of how well Richard M. Nixon was bearing up under the storm. He walked alone on the beach, he was said to be suffering from "depression"—or to be strong and secure and at peace with himself.

On the long flight back to Washington he joked and bantered with his Secret Service agents. It was not his customary style; some saw in this behavior a sign that he was relaxed and confident, others took it as a personal signal of a man searching for reassurance and support.

He entered a hostile capital on Sunday, July 28, and more blows came. Monday and Tuesday brought further impeachment articles against him. John B. Connally, Big John, whom he had celebrated and elevated into a possible presidential role, was indicted in a Watergate-related case. John D. Ehrlichman, one of his indispensable aides was sentenced to the longest prison term of all the major Watergate defendants. Republicans were openly talking about his imminent demise. They were publicly debating their personal positions, and carefully keeping them free of any party stand.

The President retreated into the recesses of the executive mansion. He canceled all the week's meetings but one. His principal spokesman, Ronald L. Ziegler, who so strongly and recently had attacked the impeachment inquiry as a kangaroo court, was mute.

One night, the President broke away from his self-imposed White House isolation for a cruise down the Potomac on the presidential yacht Sequoia. He was accompanied only by his wife, Pat, and daughter, Julie.

Thursday night he took to the water again, this time in the company of his closest friend, C. G. (Bebe) Rebozo, who had come up from Florida and who was under investigation for his handling of the President's financial affairs.

There was no escape. At James D. St. Clair, his attorney, delivered 20 more tapes to the court Tuesday, and was forced to concede the next day that another gap existed. There were re-

ports of White House documents having been "doctored."

There were other signs of turmoil. On Wednesday morning St. Clair attended a private meeting of the Chowder and Marching Society, the elite group of GOP conservatives in Congress, of which Mr. Nixon had been a member. In the words of one participant, St. Clair came "under fire," and was strongly interrogated about the President's affairs.

The situation became so fractious that finally Rep. Tom S. Railsback of Illinois came to St. Clair's defense. The irony of that action was not lost on those present; Railsback had voted for the two strongest, most sweeping articles of impeachment.

Food prices increased again, the unemployment rate inched upward, the Midwest was parched by a severe drought, there were rumblings that the delicate hopes for detente with the Soviet Union were being jeopardized by the impeachment process.

In this sea of trouble, there was continual maneuver on Capitol Hill, where compromise has always been at the heart of the political process.

First, there was a brief revival of the old "Frey plan," advanced six months ago by the Florida congressman, Lou Frey Jr. Under this proposal, Mr. Nixon would ask for a pro forma impeachment by the House without debate in order to move the matter promptly to the Senate and avoid the stain of a divisive impeachment vote. White House aides, surprisingly, said they were taking the proposal seriously. The trouble was that they had not talked to their principal, the President, who rejected the idea.

By the end of the week, a more serious scenario was being developed by politicians and congressmen who still hoped to avoid the trauma of a Senate trial and the increasingly probable trauma of Mr. Nixon's removal from the presidency.

The central element in this scenario was the President's resignation during the hiatus between the House vote on impeachment and the Senate trial. In exchange for stepping down,

the President would be granted immunity from future lawsuits and prosecution, as Rep. Wilbur Mills (D-Ark. proposed some months ago.

One of the authors of this proposal is a former high official in the Nixon administration and a personal friend of the President. He used a euphemism for what he was after. It would not, he said, be a presidential "resignation," but rather "an orderly transfer of power" to Vice President Ford, who would quickly succeed to the presidency.

This idea had strong support in some quarters of the Senate. One Southern Republican senator, a long-time Nixon ally, saw nothing but disaster ahead for the President. There were no more than 20 to 25 "hard core" votes in the Senate against impeachment, he said, and the White House had lost all power to affect the outcome.

"We are not subject to White House pressure any more," he said. "People are telling the truth when they say they are ready to take their lumps and vote to acquit or convict on the evidence."

And nothing the President can do, he said, will change that; the White House has run out of chips: "The President has put too many people out on a limb too many times. The White House has used up all its good will and credibility. Only evidence could help him now."

Another Republican, a hot partisan, affirmed that view; "There is just no friendship left in the Senate which he can call on." The objective evidence seemed to confirm that assessment. None of the possible leaders of a save-Nixon movement had shown any inclination to play that role—not John Tower of Texas, nor Robert Dole of Kansas, nor Barry Goldwater of Arizona, nor Hugh Scott of Pennsylvania nor Bill Brock of Tennessee.

They would all feel more comfortable, according to the grapevine, if the President would simply step aside and avoid the final ordeal.

The problem was that even among those senators and politicians who had

given him the most support and loyalty in the past, no one seemed to know how to approach Richard Nixon.

"If the President wanted to listen," said one, "He would have already."

"He wouldn't listen anyhow," said another. "Everybody's tried at one time or another to help him—begged, pleaded and he doesn't listen."

And a third Republican senator, a Nixon loyalist, lamented: "Everything Nixon touches seems to turn to ashes. Each time we go down there [to the White House] we are told to wait for the good news, but it never comes."

What emerged from their comments, too, was the common realization that for all his years in public life and for all their personal association with the President, no one knew what might be in his mind.

So it all came down to the unfathomable character of Richard Milhous Nixon.

No matter how long he has been at the center stage of American life, no matter how much he has revealed about himself, he remains the one of the most enigmatic politicians of our time. In 1952, in the "crisis" over his secret fund and the demands that he be dropped from the Eisenhower ticket, he privately wrote out his own resignation.

In 1960, after he lost to John F. Kennedy, he declined to follow the advice of many and challenge the contested outcome in critical Illinois. In 1962, after his defeat in the California gubernatorial race, he gave his celebrated and emotional public farewell to politics with the bitter remark that the press wouldn't have him to kick around anymore.

In the mid-1960s, out of office, he called for the invasion of North Vietnam; as President he brought the war, for Americans, to a conclusion. He had been ardently opposed to "Red" China; as President he went to Peking and opened a new era in East-West relations.

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