

Rhodes: Stanching the Blood

The agonizing within the House of Representatives over impeachment has not been limited to members of the Judiciary Committee or to rank-and-file members of both parties: it has most particularly borne down on the Republican leader of the House, Congressman John Rhodes of Arizona. Last week Rhodes let it be known that he had been struggling with the question of whether Richard Nixon should be impeached, and would announce his decision this week.

In ordinary times, it would be inconceivable that a Republican congressional leader could seriously be entertaining the idea of voting to impeach a Republican President. In the first place, it could prove disastrous to his own career. More significant, it could have a disproportionate effect on the whole impeachment fight, freeing Republican Congressmen to vote their conscience—or the politics of their districts—and unquestionably increasing the chance that the Senate would convict the President by a two-thirds vote and remove him from office.

Rhodes fully understands the potential impact of his decision on the President's fate, acknowledging that the Republican leader of the chamber constitutionally charged with the pow-

er of impeachment has a unique, if not altogether enviable position. The more prudent course might have been for him to remain silent for the moment, saying only that he would make his decision when necessary, on what he judged to be the merits of the case. But, as he told TIME Correspondent Neil MacNeil in an interview last week, because of his "unique position," he is more mindful than most Republicans of the fact that the impeachment crisis must not be allowed to tear the party to pieces.

As Rhodes sees it, impeachment by the House of Representatives is a certainty; the President, he says flatly, "is down the tube." Further, he fears that even if the Senate does not vote to convict the President, the vote will be so close to a two-thirds majority that the nation would be left without an effective President for the next two years.

Accepting all this as a foregone conclusion, Rhodes is examining the special obligations imposed upon him by the crisis: how to save as many Republican Congressmen as possible from defeat in November, and how to avoid party schism. Last week he described the situation as he saw it to his old friend Vice President Gerald Ford. "I thought he ought to know," Rhodes said. "I think he got the message." He telephoned his

friend George Bush, the G.O.P. national chairman, to ask: "You got any good news?" Quipped Bush: "Yes, it's 12:17 and nobody's been indicted." The hardcore Nixonites in the House have been furious at Rhodes' reticence the past few weeks. "Why aren't you defending the President?" demanded one. Rhodes replied that impeachment was not a partisan matter and that he would decide the question in his best judgment as a lawyer, not as a Republican. "I hope," he continued, "that all members will weigh the evidence objectively, and then vote in a manner that they think right and in the best interest of the country."

The Administration has also tried to exert influence upon him. One White House official telephoned him to say: "John, it's time for a head count." But Rhodes refused to order it because he was determined to avoid arm twisting. He feels a responsibility to counsel all 186 of his party colleagues in the House, many of whom are being hurt by the intraparty crossfire, and last week began to meet with them in groups of eight or ten. His message to all: take special care during the impeachment debate "not to widen the division among Republicans; analyze the evidence in such a way as not to hurt anybody else." He promises to campaign for all Republicans, regardless of how they vote. He told one group: "I can't put the umbrella over all of you,

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but I can help to wipe away the rain from the faces of those not under the umbrella."

The Kansas-born son of a retail lumber dealer, Rhodes moved to Arizona after World War II and began to practice law. In 1952, at the same time his friend Barry Goldwater was elected to the U.S. Senate, Rhodes became Arizona's first Republican member of the House of Representatives, and he has been there ever since. He has held important posts on the Appropriations and Republican Policy Committees, and he has worked hard, as befits an Arizona Congressman, to secure for his state a larger share of Colorado River water. Last summer the Rhodes clan—John Rhodes, his wife Betty, their daughter, three sons and two grandchildren—gathered to enjoy the river in a different way: they floated through the Grand Canyon on a raft.

Since last December, when he succeeded Jerry Ford as minority leader, Rhodes has believed that his principal loyalty should lie with his Republican colleagues rather than his Republican President. But he traces his serious doubts about Richard Nixon's presidency to his reading of the White House transcripts last May. At that time, Rhodes suggested publicly that the President might well consider resigning if he was impeached by the House.

Privately, he continued his study. He

read the pertinent parts of The Federalist papers, the debates at the Constitutional Convention and in the first House of Representatives and, most important, the massive volumes of evidence published by the Judiciary Committee. "The creation of the 'plumbers' unit has always bothered me, and what flowed from that act," he said last week. "The use of the IRS has also been bothersome to me."

Rhodes has made it fairly clear that if he were an ordinary Republican Congressman, he would vote against Articles I and III but support Article II, the charge that Richard Nixon abused his powers as President, broke his oath of office and misused federal agencies. But

Rhodes is no ordinary Congressman, and this fact exerts a powerful influence on his decision. Already there has been open bitterness in the House ranks, much of it directed at Maryland Congressman Lawrence Hogan, the first Republican on the Judiciary Committee to announce that he would vote for impeachment. Hogan got a raspberry when he came onto the House floor after making his announcement. One Republican cried, "We're going to take up a collection to beat Hogan's ass!" Rhodes realizes that such anger could mortally damage the party, and he is doing everything he can to contain it. "I'm going to be a [Red Cross] corpsman," he says of his role in the weeks ahead, "and stanch the flow of blood."

BRACK—BLACK STAR



HOUSE MINORITY LEADER RHODES IN HIS WASHINGTON OFFICE

The process must not be allowed to tear the party to pieces.