

WXPost AUG 6 1974
Nixon Weighed

Resignation, But Rejected It

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President Nixon seriously considered the option of resigning and temporarily rejected it, informed White House sources said yesterday.

They said that Mr. Nixon, aware that his hopes of averting impeachment would be seriously damaged by his latest transcribed disclosures, brought up the possibility of resignation Sunday at a Camp David meeting with his top aides. The President also discussed the possibility of letting Vice President Ford take over temporarily under provisions of the 25th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, these sources said.

During the discussion, according to one source, presidential assistant Patrick J. Buchanan and White House defense lawyer James D. St. Clair pictured Mr. Nixon's situation as virtually unsalvageable. They seemed to be counseling the President that his only alternatives are impeachment and removal or resignation from office.

A tight-lipped Alexander M. Haig Jr., the White House chief of staff, also painted a grim picture to White House staff members. He informed them ahead of time yesterday afternoon that the President intended to make available to the House Judiciary Committee "material that will be damaging to us."

In talking to the staff Haig spoke of "rough weeks ahead" in reaction to the President's release of hitherto withheld transcripts of conversations between Mr. Nixon and his onetime chief of staff, H. R. (Bob) Haldeman.

One staff member left the meeting saying that "it's now only a matter of time for the President." Another said: "It's a brand new ball game and we're in the fourth quarter with the score 21-0 against us."

Resignation also was considered as a likely alternative on Capitol Hill, where the Senate's No. 2 Republican, GOP Whip Robert Griffin of Michigan, said the President should resign in "the national and his own interests."

But a high-ranking source close to the administration said Mr. Nixon had lost his opportunity to resign in exchange for some congressionally conferred immunity from future prosecutions or civil suits.

He said the House leadership on both sides of the aisle would now insist upon a vote.

Both House Speaker Carl Albert (D-Okla.) and Majority Leader Thomas P. O'Neill (D-Mass.) denied that they had been approached by White House officials with proposals for a presidential immunity bill.

One Republican, who advocates such a solution, said

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it would now be impossible to get such a proposal through the House. He said a majority of GOP members would probably vote against it out of resentment at the President's disclosure yesterday that he had not been telling the truth about the Watergate cover-up.

This source said Mr. Nixon had seriously weighed the possibility of an immediate resignation. Another source said the President had instructed one of his speechwriters to prepare "material that could be used for a resignation speech" while emphasizing that Mr. Nixon had made no decision to step down.

Still another source said the President had given his greatest consideration to invoking the 25th Amendment, intended to allow for presidential succession in cases of disability. Ford's aides said they had not been advised of any change in the Vice President's status that would require a change in schedule.

At the Camp David meeting Mr. Nixon appeared to be the only person who thought the 25th Amendment option worthy of serious consideration, said one source. St. Clair, Haig, Buchanan and presidential speechwriter Ray Price all opposed the idea.

"For the present time, at least, that option has been foreclosed," the source said.

Price was described by this same source as agreeing that Mr. Nixon's position was nearly hopeless but suggesting that he again take his case to the people. Haig described the President's alternatives as "depressing" and reportedly took no strong position on any of the options discussed.

The 25th Amendment alternative was raised by the

President after St. Clair and Buchanan brought up the option of outright resignation. Mr. Nixon told his aides he is not prepared to resign at this time and questioned Buchanan and St. Clair about the accuracy of their grim impeachment assessment.

"He wasn't quite prepared to accept how bad it really is," the source said, and added: "He wouldn't believe all of this . . . He wishes he heard something else."

St. Clair concentrated on the legal difficulties posed by the President's prospective release of the Haldeman tapes. Buchanan delivered a gloomy political assessment, advising the President that Senate conviction was becoming more likely every day.

"I wish you hadn't said that," the President reportedly replied in a tone the source described as one of sadness, not of anger.

A week ago—at a time that the White House officially was predicting that impeachment would be beaten in the House—Buchanan bluntly told reporters that there had been "serious slippage" in the President's position.

Another sign of this "slippage" occurred Sunday when Minority Leader John Rhodes of Arizona canceled a press conference he had scheduled for Monday to announce his position on impeachment.

There were conflicting reports about what position Rhodes intended to announce, and an aide said Rhodes had postponed his press conference until Wednesday because of "a cold and a sore throat." However, one source said Rhodes also had been asked to hold off his announcement by Haig, who telephoned him Sunday.

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