

# Charles Wiggins: A Man of Law

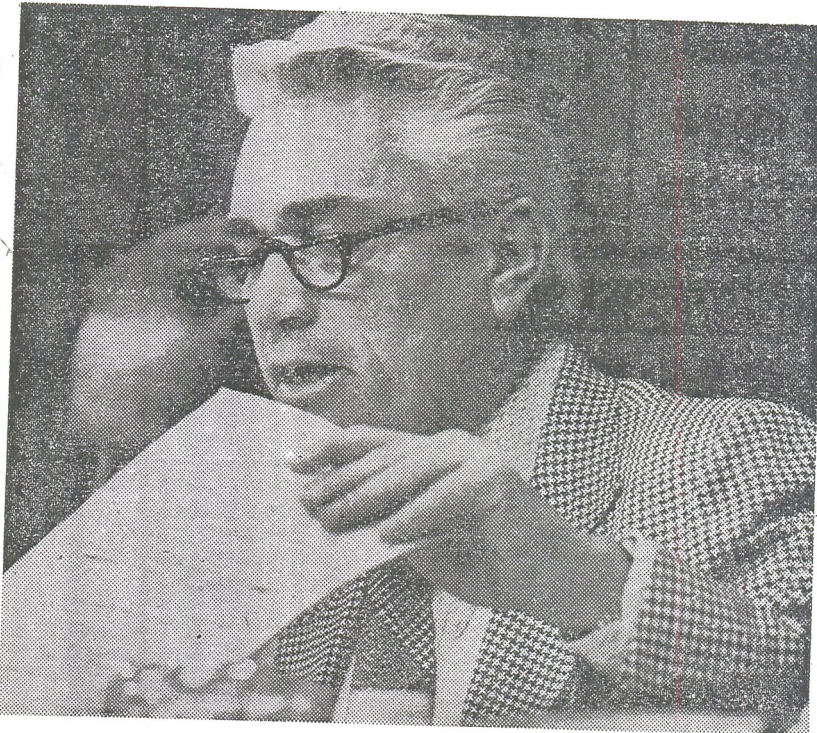
It came as no surprise to Rep. Charles E. Wiggins' colleagues on the House Judiciary Committee when Wiggins led the about-face that resulted in unanimous committee endorsement of President Nixon's impeachment.

Wiggins is the kind of lawyer who believes, as candidate Richard Nixon once professed, that "one of the operative principles of a free society is that men are accountable for what they do." When Wiggins was privately informed by White House chief of staff Alexander M. Haig Jr. and defense lawyer James D. St. Clair Aug. 2 that the President had been withholding evidence about his direction of the Watergate cover-up, Wiggins quietly told them that Mr. Nixon had two alternatives: Plead the Fifth Amendment or turn over the incriminating tape to the Judiciary Committee. Wiggins said afterward that he was prepared to make the evidence known if the White House did not do so.

For the majority of the committee the evidence to impeach had been demonstrated long before Mr. Nixon's damning disclosure that he had been principally involved in the cover-up at least since June 23, 1972. But the evidence had not been there for Wiggins, a lawyer's lawyer who had framed the impeachment standards narrowly and insisted on evidence to match his premises. To the Democratic majority he was a marvelously skilled lawyer who viewed the web of accumulated evidence through the wrong end of the telescope. To the White House he seemed a legal godsend who was able to make the President's case against impeachment far more effectively than any Nixon spokesman ever had.

"Maybe I'm a true believer," says Wiggins about himself, "but the thing I truly believe in is the law. I was absolutely comfortable with my position because it was based on the law and the evidence as I understood it."

No one doubted that Wiggins would follow his view of the evidence. "He has just tremendous courage and a certain serenity about his view of American life and the law," says Rep. Don Edwards, a onetime president of the Americans for Democratic Action who is as consistently recorded on the liberal side of the voting ledger as Wiggins is on the conservative side. Both



California congressmen share membership on the Judiciary Committee, a mutual respect for the other's legal abilities and a willingness to ignore party lines when they conflict with principle.

"Almost singlehandedly Chuck protected the Constitution from a school prayer amendment that would have undermined the Bill of Rights," says Edwards. "He fought it on the floor and provided enough conservative votes to defeat it. It's a conservative issue, really, but many of his colleagues refused to see it that way. Chuck thought the First Amendment meant what it said."

Wiggins showed similar courage in opposing the popular equal rights amendment when it emerged from the Judiciary subcommittee which Edwards heads. "He almost succeeded in scuttling it," Edwards recalls. And last year, when a number of conservative congressmen decided to support an emotionally popular bill to give \$50,000 to the widows of policemen killed in the line duty, Wiggins took the course he thought both unpopular and constitu-

tional. He said the issue was a matter for local governments to decide and voted against the bill.

Wiggins came to Congress in 1966 after upsetting a Democratic incumbent in a district once partially represented by Richard Nixon. He asked Mr. Nixon to campaign for him in that race but Nixon, apparently considering the race a lost cause, never came. Afterward, Nixon called Wiggins up to congratulate him and asked him what committee he wanted to serve on in the House. "Judiciary" replied Wiggins without hesitation.

When Mr. Nixon became President in 1969, Wiggins proved a faithful supporter on most issues. In 1972 Wiggins tried to dissuade his friend Rep. Paul N. (Pete) McCloskey from challenging Mr. Nixon in the GOP presidential primaries "Very simply, Pete, you are being used," he wrote. "Your enormous talents and high potential for our party are being perverted and misdirected by those who are not pro-McCloskey, but anti-Nixon."

McCloskey, who saw things about the President that others were not to

see until Mr. Nixon was re-elected, ignored Wiggins' advice but became an ever closer friend. McCloskey believes that in the impeachment hearings Wiggins, "more than any other member of the Judiciary Committee, set a tone and a style of debate that must have led the people of the country to think much more highly of the process. His dignity and his approach helped the committed members to behave like lawyers, not politicians. He someday ought to be attorney general."

Even before the disclosures that turned Wiggins from the leading foe of impeachment into its advocate, this tone and dignity cited by McCloskey did as much as anything to demonstrate the desperation of the White House position. While Wiggins was formulating a narrow, tightly constructed impeachment defense, White House Press Secretary Ronald L. Ziegler was talking about a "kangaroo court." The contrast between the reality and Ziegler's description was not lost on the American people or on the Congress.

Now, in the shambles of the Nixon presidency and the achievement of the House Judiciary Committee, Wiggins is looking ahead. "Reforms are needed so that these abuses cannot happen again," he says. He talks of the political campaign reform bill, of legislation that defines and limits national security searches and of the necessity to "build in a buffer between political officeholders and agencies of government. In terms of constituent inquiries there's no reason that the President of the United States or Chuck Wiggins should deal with the Internal Revenue Service on behalf of anybody. That's not a novel idea but clearly it's in order."

In the last analysis Wiggins, both as lawyer and legislator, turns out to believe in the kind of values that lawyer and onetime legislator Nixon preached but rarely practiced. Wiggins believes, as Mr. Nixon has said, that "politics is not merely some kind of game to be played hard and played for keeps . . . but a sacred trust." He believes, as Mr. Nixon also once said, that "respect for law can come only from people who take the law into their hearts and minds—and not into their hands." Wiggins turns out to be such a man.