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The Political Impact

Reaction to Indictment Could Result in Severe Blow to Republican Prospects

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WASHINGTON, March 1—More than a year and half after the apprehension of a bugging squad inside the headquarters of the Democratic National Committee, the judicial branch of the Government has pointed the finger of accusation at the four men who were then President Nixon's closest advisers and raised questions about the veracity of the President himself. Accusations have been hurled at these men for months by politicians, the news media, commentators and Watergate witnesses. But those charges did not have behind them the weight of a grand jury of ordinary men and women, presumably impartial and dispassionate and they were not couched in the precise and yet frighteningly blunt language of indictment.

Much of what was said in the hearings of the Senate Watergate committee was stale stuff indeed to the Washington political community, but it hit the average voter hard. The same thing is likely to happen as the public views the picture painted by the grand jurors of conduct at the very core of the American Government in late 1972 and early 1973.

Called 'Conspirators'

Here are Charles W. Colson and John N. Mitchell and H. R. Haldeman and John D. Ehrlichman—the most awesome names in town only a year or so ago—officially described as “the conspirators” who tried “by deceit, craft, trickery and dishonest means” to “defraud the United States Government.”

The charges remain to be proved, of course, but as they stand, they do not constitute a pretty or edifying picture.

Perhaps the first political impact—or lack thereof—will be seen in next Tuesday's special Congressional election in the First District of Ohio. Even before the indictment was handed down this morning, the Republican candidate, Willis D. Gradison Jr., appeared to be running behind, at least in part because many of the voters seemed to be equating Gradison with Republicanism, with the Nixon Administration and with Watergate.

Should that trend be amplified by today's events, as some of Mr. Gradison's supporters fear it will be, and should he

lose, the effect on the Republicans will go far beyond the loss of a single seat. A Gradison defeat would mean three consecutive losses in special elections, and would sow fear and possibly defeatism among the Republicans who must run for re-election this fall.

Pressure on Nixon

Some politicians believe it would also increase the pressure on Mr. Nixon to resign—a kind of pressure that he said, in his news conference on Monday, he was ready to resist.

The chairman of the Republican National Committee, George Bush, sought in an interview today to suggest that the voters' anger at Watergate would be directed toward incumbents of both parties, not just at Republicans. But that was not the private judgment of most officeholders. One Republican centrist, Senator Bob Packwood of Oregon, said in an interview today that the indictments “could only hurt” Republican candidates.

“The ring of indictments around the President is now complete,” the Senator said.

“Only through impeachment and trial can he even hope to clear his name and his Administration's.”

A further suggestion of the adverse effects of Watergate on Republican candidates came in a report in The Detroit Free Press of a survey made by the Market Research Corporation for the Republican National Committee in a Michigan special election for the House that took place Feb. 18.

Most Cited Watergate

The poll showed that 60 percent of those who voted for Richard F. VanderVeen, the Democrat who scored an upset victory, thought his Republican opponent better qualified. And three-quarters of those cited Watergate as the reason for casting their protest votes.

Today's indictments would seem likely, in the view of most analysts here, to intensify such feelings. And to make things worse, from the Republicans' point of view, the bad news is now certain to continue right through the general elections

in November.

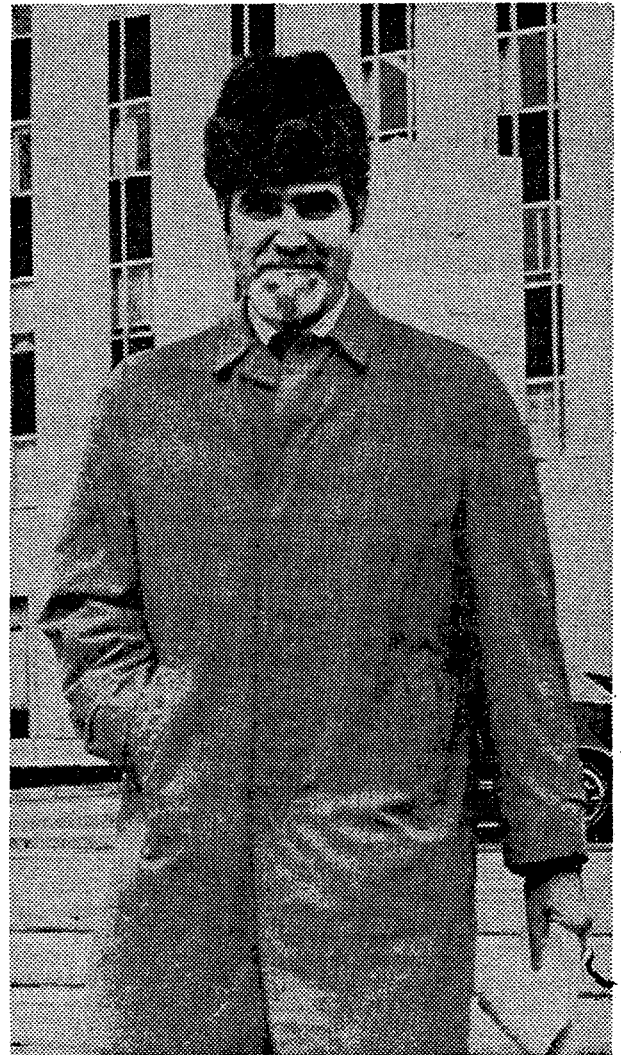
The trial of those indicted today will probably take place in late summer or fall and is expected to last three or four months. Additional indictments are expected. All the while, the impeachment proceedings on Capitol Hill will continue to move ahead.

In fact, Watergate now appears to be an open sore in the side of the Administration as long as it holds office and to affect, in ways that are not now clear, the Presidential campaign of 1976.

Effect on President

And what of Mr. Nixon himself?

Although some of his associates suggested that he had been untouched by the grand jury's actions, the indictment implied that he had known of plans to pay “hush money” to



The New York Times/George James
Vladimir Pregelj, foreman of the Watergate grand jury, leaving the U.S. Courthouse yesterday in Washington with a copy of new indictment.

the original Watergate defendants. In addition, there is a widespread belief among legal experts that the sealed report turned in by the jury may contain information damaging to the President that his associates do not know of.

But Mr. Nixon, in the words of one of his oldest friends, is "a very tough man." He has said often in recent days, almost as if preparing himself for this new phase of his gravest crisis, that good men never quit when under fire.

If today's developments appear to move him somewhat closer to impeachment — and they would seem to—and if they appear to increase the likelihood that he will be urged to resign by frightened Republicans—and they do—they by no means indicate that Mr. Nixon has run out of room to fight for survival.

Especially if the energy crisis continues, especially if the economy turns sour as Watergate developments unfold in the weeks ahead, all the old questions about the President's ability to govern will be raised again. But he apparently means to press on at the White House, and even to do a modest amount of traveling this month—to Chicago, to Houston and possibly to Nashville.

It was a big day in the Watergate case, but in the Watergate case, big days always have been followed by more big days.
