

William S. White

The Mood Changes on Capitol Hill

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The power relationship that is to prevail in this last half of this session of the Democratic Congress will favor the President a good deal more than all the surface indications might suggest.

To begin with, the Watergate scandal has clearly done the President about all the damage that it is going to do. Nobody of any real responsibility or real position in public life now talks about either a presidential impeachment or a presidential resignation.

To the contrary, the Democratic leaders in both the Senate and House are coldly unmoved by the very idea. They have already done much to squelch such talk wherever it has arisen from among fringe members on the Democratic far left. And they will now do more squelching if that should become necessary.

Moreover, the bulk of the evidence from current polls and congressional mail and other grass roots contacts clearly suggests that Mr. Nixon is moving sharply upward in public favor, or at least in public toleration, from the low point to which he had sunk in the early phase of the Ervin committee hearings.

Perhaps more important, there is the plainest of impressions at the Capitol that the Ervin committee hearings have become to a considerable part of the public not only a bore but also that

they have lost a very considerable degree of their credibility.

The controlling Democrats not only are aware of this — and by the way a good many of them were never all that enthusiastic about the inquiry in the first place — but also are not disinclined to encourage such a mood among the public. The reasons why the Democratic patriarchs are not exactly keen for more and more hearings (especially if they are to be conducted under the lights of TV) are mixed.

For one thing these fellows are genuinely troubled that week upon week of accusations have not produced any proof of criminal misconduct by the

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President himself. These are not on the whole unfair men and they are not comfortable at the immense record of mere hearsay and innuendo thus far written.

Moreover, and this is the more important factor, they, too, are professional politicians and they know that the sword of mistrust and contempt for that profession has two edges. And,

specifically, they are far from happy that the Republicans on the Ervin committee are now talking of looking into money abuses — not to mention some so-called “dirty tricks” — on the Democratic side of the street in the campaign of last year.

In short, the congressional Democrats by a very wide majority would be glad to get rid of Watergate and everything about it and go on to other business. They believe, and with considerable justice, that in the old-fashioned bread-and-butter matters they have got a pretty strong issue against the President.

They know that so long as the people are being preoccupied almost totally with stories of political sins, whether real or only alleged, the people's attention cannot be effectively centered on such matters as the high cost of living.

Now, all this does not mean that the President is going to have fair weather all the way through the rest of this congressional season. It does mean, however, that there is not going to be any wide and automatic hostility to anything and everything he may propose.

Even though the President has indeed been damaged by Watergate, no senior Democrat known to me — and specifically no Democrat who is a real presidential possibility for 1976 — believes that it has done anything much to help the Democrats as a party.

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