

Is Watergate Slowing

By Mary Russell

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Is Congress wallowing in Watergate, bogged down by impeachment and dragging its feet on energy crisis legislation?

House Minority Leader John J. Rhodes (R-Ariz.) charges that Watergate is "slowing down the work of Congress." He hastens to add that he doesn't think the Democratic leadership is deliberately stalling legislation, but that it's an "unconscious thing. I do think there is probably a slowdown in the output of the entire government because of Watergate."

President Nixon, in a nationwide address during the Senate Watergate hearings last summer, warned that Congress was becoming "mired in Watergate" while "legislation vital to your health and well-being sits unattended on the congressional calendar."

In a recent appearance before the National Association of Broadcasters, the President blamed the energy crisis in part on congressional inaction.

Are the charges valid?

A survey of the progress of legislation yields a mixed picture. And assessing who or what is to blame for any lack of progress mixes the picture still more.

For instance, on the surface, the sheer volume of legislation passed in this second session of the 93d Congress is far behind that of the second session of the 92d Congress. So far this year Congress has passed 166 measures as opposed to 303 measures passed by March 31, 1972.

But in enacting major leg-



SEN. JACOB R. JAVITS



REP. JOHN J. RHODES

... Rhodes says yes; Javits sees Nixon turn to right

islation with broad national interest, Congress is running about even with 1972 or slightly better.

In energy legislation, the President himself must share the blame, since he vetoed the major item — a comprehensive Energy Emergency Act. But half a dozen other energy items have been kicking around Congress since last summer.

Of major legislation in the 92d Congress of 1971-72, Congressional Quarterly shows only two items signed

into law by the end of March 1972— campaign-financing reform and added enforcement powers for the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission.

As of the end of March, 1974, the 93d Congress had sent to the President. Foreign aid and Alaska pipeline, both enacted last year, have been signed into law. Energy emergency legislation was vetoed, and the

minimum wage increase awaits presidential action.

Passed by both houses but awaiting conference agreement are three major bills— budget reform, pension reform and an independent Legal Services Corporation. A fourth bill, authorizing mass transit subsidies, was reported by conference but stalled by the House Rules Committee.

Watergate and Watergate-related matters have directly taken up little time in committee and practically no time on the floor. Only the Senate Watergate committee has spent considerable time on the subject. Investigations into CIA-related matters, the President's spending on his private homes and tax-related matters have been generally conducted by small subcom-

mittees or, in the case of taxes, a joint committee. And, of course, there is the House Judiciary Committee's impeachment inquiry.

In assessing the debilitating effect of Watergate on legislation in general, again the blame may belong as much to the President as to Congress.

With the White House staff decimated by Watergate and the White House itself preoccupied, executive agencies have been left to drift. In dealing with legislation, they find themselves with few new proposals or weak White House backing, or pre-empted by an increasingly powerful Office of Management and Budget—all making Rhodes' point that the entire government has slowed down its output.

Some members of Congress, including Rep. Morris Udall (D-Ariz.) and Sen. Jacob Javits (R-N.Y.), suggest that the President, to consolidate his conservative support, has taken a right turn in his attitude toward legislation — throwing a last-minute wrench into the progress of bills on which Congress believed there was no White House opposition. White House resistance has cropped up in recent weeks to Consumer Protection Agency legislation, land use and legal services.

In addition, political analysts predict that this will be a perilous year for all incumbents, in Watergate's wake. So everyone running for re-election is anxious to

Congress?

make as many trips home as possible to shore up his campaign. Worrying about the home front may have distracted many members of Congress from their legislative duties.

Watergate has had a special effect on the Democrats.

Democratic strategy has been to restrain partisan comments on Watergate and let the Republicans squirm. Particularly in the House, Democratic leaders feel that partisanship must be kept down to avoid dividing Republicans and Democrats on the Judiciary Committee—a division they think the White House is trying to bring about.

But this leadership strategy chafes some Democrats. Feeling that the party should take active advantage of the President's weakened position, these members have become snappish and churlish toward their own leaders.

And finally, if the House Judiciary Committee does recommend impeachment, the debate on the floor will take considerable time. If impeachment is voted by the House, both houses could be further tied up by the Senate trial.

The result then, is likely to be a barren year for landmark legislation in Congress. Rather, as for the nation as a whole, it will be a year of Watergate exorcism, not "wallowing" in Watergate, but facing an issue that's become unavoidable.