

The Homestretch

As the Watergate scandals have engulfed the Presidency, it is inevitable that they have somewhat impeded the work of Congress. Most of the time, Mr. Nixon has been too preoccupied with Watergate and with his foreign journeys to pay much personal attention to the flow of legislation. The normal dialogue on legislation between Capitol Hill and the White House has been for the most part disrupted—a notable exception being the Administration's successful fight last week for funds for the International Development Association (I.D.A.).

On the rare occasions that Mr. Nixon has intervened, it has usually been to conciliate the hard-shell conservatives upon whom he depends for support in any impeachment showdown. This defensive strategy has had a disastrous effect on two important environmental bills—on national land use and on control of strip mining—where the Administration backed off from constructive positions it had earlier adopted.

With both houses returning tomorrow from the Fourth of July holiday and with the prospect that debate on an impeachment report from the House Judiciary Committee may soon pre-empt attention, Congress has to recognize that it is entering the homestretch. Only bills passed in the next several weeks have any chance in this Congress.

Aside from the question of the President's continuance in office, the most exigent problem before the nation is the unsatisfactory state of the economy. Inflation is serious, and the financial markets reflect widespread uneasiness. This is a many-sided problem for which neither Administration nor Congress has come forward with any promising policies.

For different reasons, both the Administration and its Congressional adversaries have moved away—at least for the time being—from their past support for wage and price controls. In this stalemate, firm leadership on economic issues cannot be expected from either end of Pennsylvania Avenue unless a crisis compels action.

On health, housing, education and welfare issues, some progress is in evidence. It would be too optimistic to expect enactment of national health insurance legislation this year. But several different approaches have now been worked out, and the groundwork is being laid for action on this major legislation in the next Congress.

Both houses have approved the extension of the landmark Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, but agreement on the conference version has been snarled by the ugly quarrel over school busing, in which the House is insisting on unnecessarily restrictive language.

Another conference committee is at work redrafting

an omnibus housing bill in the face of obdurate Administration opposition to virtually all existing programs in this field. Compromise is inevitable, but the version approved by the House would penalize the larger cities and goes too far toward accommodating the Administration's negativism toward housing programs for the very poor.

A similar veto threat hangs over conference deliberations on bills to provide urgently needed operating subsidies for mass transit and to establish a Legal Services Corporation to assist the poor.

In addition to salvaging those measures, Congress has under consideration five other important bills. The Senate ought to pass the Administration's foreign trade bill already approved by the House, which would give the President authority to reduce tariffs and quotas and to allow normal trade relations with the Soviet Union.

It would be a scandal if Congress failed to pass a strong campaign reform bill with provision for partial public financing of Congressional as well as Presidential elections. Such a measure should be much closer to the Senate-passed bill than to the much inferior version just reported by the House Administration Committee. It is imperative that the National Land Use Policy bill be resurrected and considered on its merits.

These bills along with measures to establish a consumer protection agency and to regulate strip mining effectively comprise the minimum that Congress needs to consider—before turning its full attention to the great drama of impeachment.