

Suspicion of Nixon Common in Senate

By Spencer Rich

Washington Post Staff Writer

There is a widespread belief in the Senate that President Nixon knew about the Watergate events long before he publicly admitted it, and that he was engaged in cover-up efforts, a Washington Post survey conducted yesterday showed.

That belief is by no means universal, particularly among Republicans. Most senators voicing it quickly add that without further evidence to corroborate the cover-up accusations made by former White House counsel John W. Dean III, there wouldn't be enough legal basis to impeach the President.

But interviews with more than two dozen senators of both parties yesterday show that of now 16 believe the President was engaged in the cover-up, three were undecided or refused to speak on the matter even without public attribution, and only six Republicans and one Southern Democrat said they believe the President's denials that he was engaged in any cover-up.

"It's conceivable he knew nothing," said one Midwestern Republican usually associated with the moderate-to-conservative wing of his party. "It's difficult to believe, but it's conceivable," he added, laughing.

This senator like most of those surveyed refused to let his name be used for fear of incurring White House wrath or seeming to prejudge the situation.

"Do I believe Nixon was covering up?" said one Southern Democrat who has repeatedly refused to criticize the President publicly on the Watergate matter. "Yes, I think so. I suspect he was involved in the cover-up but you haven't got the evidence to prove it. I found Dean convincing. In my own mind, I believe it."

"We all believe he was involved in it, but no one dares say it publicly for attribution," said another Southern Democrat in an

earlier interview.

"I find it hard to believe how he could have avoided knowing about it," said a Northeastern Democratic liberal. "He's got the burden of proof now."

"In my heart I think he did know about it," said a Midwestern Democrat. "Dean is a credible witness. But you don't impeach the President on the basis of one uncorroborated source."

"I just find it incredible that Mitchell, Dean, Halde- man, Ehrlichman could be doing it without him knowing something about it,"

said a Midwestern Republican. "But it's not beyond a reasonable doubt. Dean would have a hard time proving his case in a court of law."

"I cannot believe that a tried and true investigator and politically sensitive guy like Nixon could have

floated from June or July 1972 to April 1973 without knowing what's going on," said a Midwestern Democrat who is highly respected as one of the fairest men in the Senate.

Among the six Republicans who defended the President were Henry Bellmon (R-Okla.), George D. Aiken (R-Vt.) and Peter Dominick (R-Colo.).

"No, I don't think he was covering up," said Dominick. "I know the reliance he places on his aides. If they were involved they could keep information from him. If he was talking to Halde- man and Ehrlichman and he relies on them and they tell him no, then he would believe them. That's what I believe occurred."

"No, I'm convinced he's not involved," said Bellmon, "though I didn't see the Dean testimony. I was his campaign manager from August, 1967, through the New Hampshire primary, and he's a man who cares nothing about details. He doesn't want them or concern himself with them."

Aiken's defense was less absolute. "There's a possibility he didn't want to know things going on," he said. "I don't think he wanted to know about the conduct of it until it began to get to be a disaster ... he should have known."

The one Southern Democrat who said he didn't believe Mr. Nixon was engaged in the cover-up also was qualified in his statement.

"I don't think he knew, but there were sufficient straws in the wind that had he pursued them, it would have allowed him to find out earlier than he did ... I don't feel he tried to pursue them."

Of the 16 senators who said they believe the President was engaged in the cover-up, 12 were Democrats (including several Southerners) and four were Republicans. Of the seven senators defending Mr. Nixon (albeit lukewarmly in a few cases), six were Republicans and one a Southern Democrat. Of three senators who were undecided, two were Republicans and one a Democrat.