

The Michigan Chapter

Nixon's Politics of Survival

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By Henry Brandon

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It was part of President Nixon's politics of survival that he ventured last week into a special congressional by-election in Michigan.

He rushed to support James Sparling, who had done what no Republican candidate had dared to do since Watergate—he invited the President to campaign in his district. He is, according to opinion polls, about 6 per cent behind his Democratic opponent, Robert Traxler who, after the President's lightning appearance, called the invitation "an immense blunder".

Local Republican officials were unsure. William McLaughlin, the state chairman, when asked about the effect of the President's visit on the race, said "I won't bet a dime one way or the other. We



JAMES SPARLING
... invited President

don't know what the consequences of Sparling's identification with the President will

mean in terms of votes. This is a Republican district which two years ago went 59 per cent Republican and which has elected a Republican Congressman ever since 1934." And in reply to whether Watergate had an effect on the elections, he said: "Without Watergate you and I wouldn't be here."

And so an obscure race for a single district jumped into national prominence. So did two candidates who after next Tuesday's elections may never hit the headlines again. For Mr. Nixon it was a gamble in which he had something to gain and little to lose. A Harris Poll this week showing that President Nixon's recent public appearances had improved his popularity rating by five points to 31 per cent,

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may also have encouraged the President to make another appearance. His hope, of course, is that the more he can prove that he is not politically played out, the greater the hesitation in the House of Representatives to impeach him.

It was not surprising, therefore, that Mr. Nixon threw himself into this by-election as if he were campaigning for himself. He talked about prosperity without inflation, and of having just returned from meeting—he did not mention Pompidou's funeral—with 35 world leaders in Paris who, he stressed, continued to respect the U.S.

And if he didn't boost the morale of Sparling, who seemed to have some last minute doubts as to the wisdom of his having invited Mr. Nixon, it must have been a psychological boost to the President's morale. Even though he campaigned only in rural areas which are assumed to be heavily Republican, and avoided the two main cities, Bay City and Sagamore, where the Democrats have their strength, he could take a lot of comfort from the enthusiastic welcome he got. The crowds were in the thousands and among the plethora of home-made posters only very few were hostile. What greater compliment could he have expected than the one on a farmer's truck: "You are as welcome as the sun and rain." What comfort it must be coming from Washington to read: "Nixon is still our man!" Few call for impeachment and only one asked: "We pay taxes, why don't you?" One sounded

ambivalent: "Try him and you'll like him."

But wherever I asked people in the crowd for their reaction to the President's visit, the replies reflected the patriotic and respectful feeling Americans continue to have for their president.

A frequent comment was: "It is an honor for us that the President came." And when questioned about Watergate, in several instances the answer was: "It is not for us here to judge him."

Despite the heavy coverage of the Watergate scandals by the news media, there is still a sense of remoteness in the small towns from that problem. The prosecution of Watergate is a powerful morality drama staged in far away Washington. It has sent out its shockwaves around the country, but many talk as if they don't want to be upset by it or do not want to see the country upset by it. The President's credibility has suffered badly but the traditional ingrained doubts about Washington, if anything, have also deepened.

Robert Traxler, the Democratic candidate, says that he has not been using the Watergate issue in his campaign. "It is in the conscience of people and they know as much about it as I do. I can't contribute anything to the knowledge of the individual voter. I talk about the issues that affect the people directly, the high cost of living, unemployment, health care, the profiteering of the multinational companies and so on."

It is because of these issues, Traxler says, that this contest for a single congressional seat is "national in scope."