

4128174 GOP Ends Parley Hoping to Survive

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Troubled Republicans returned to their home states yesterday still clinging to the hope that the party's election fortunes can somehow survive association with President Nixon.

In a formal sense, the semiannual meeting of the Republican National Committee concluded with the party tied more closely to the White House than ever before.

State chairmen gave Mr. Nixon ringing applause at a private White House reception Thursday night shortly after he had returned from a triumphant political visit to Mississippi. They cheered again two days later when

party chairman George Bush defended the President. And despite private murmurs of discontent, no Republican official attempted publicly during any session of the national com-

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mittee to put distance between the party and the President on the Watergate issue.

Nevertheless, it became clear after three days of meetings here that these GOP politicians are deeply disturbed by their discovery in this year's special elections that voters are inclined to hold Republican congressional candidates responsible for the deficien-

cies of the Nixon administration.

Ironically, it was the White House itself which brought this discontent to the surface. In a Friday speech that he said had been shown beforehand to the President, White House Counselor Dean Burch in effect told the party that it must sink or swim with the President.

Mr. Nixon's roles as President and leader of the Republican Party are "indistinguishable," Burch said.

"Our hopes and our goals and our fortunes are as one," he added.

This was too much for even the loyal members of the Republican National

Committee, who greeted this intended applause line with total silence. Afterward, Burch's assertion was flatly contradicted by a number of normally supportive party officials, including former national chairman Ray Bliss.

"Now it's even more imperative that candidates run on their own," Bliss said. "I don't think our fortunes should be built on any one man, I don't care who he is."

In private conversations Republican officials went far beyond this in describing their reaction to Burch's speech. Some were bitter and angry. A few thought that Burch's remarks, which

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were accompanied by a promise of new Watergate disclosures, reflected a White House worry that Mr. Nixon may not be able to survive impeachment. One Republican described Burch's speech as "an unfortunate warning that the President is prepared to

carry the party down with him." "It's not enough that we've been consistently loyal," this official continued. "Now they're trying to rub our faces in it, even though it was the party that suffered most from CREEP (the Committee for the Re-election of the President) in 1972 and that is going to suf-

fer even more from Watergate and impeachment in 1974."

One state chairman objected in particular to Burch's statement that the "hopes and goals" of the President and the party were identical.

"His hope is that he can't beat the impeachment," said this chairman. "Our goal is that our candidates can survive in November no matter what happens to the President."

Despite this widespread disaffection with Burch's speech, most Republican officials are still unwilling to challenge the White House publicly.

"It's not so much a matter

of cowardice as a dislike of disloyalty," explained one Republican official. "The typical Republican chairman or committeeman doesn't want to be known as the guy who knifed his President in the back. There is also the practical question that we need the Nixon loyalists to win as much as the voters who are disgusted with Watergate. We just don't know what to do."

This inability of the party to frame any kind of a response of its own to Watergate was underscored at a closed-door meeting of state chairmen Thursday afternoon. In an effort to make certain that the meeting would remain strictly off-

the-record the chairmen took the unusual step of excluding all national Republican staff officials for an hour of uninhibited discussion.

At this meeting various Southern chairmen arose to describe the progress of the Republican Party in glowing terms. However, the mood was broken when J. Brian Gaffney, the Connecticut chairman, bluntly insisted on a discussion of Watergate-induced political problems.

A report from Michigan state Chairman William McLaughlin also underscored the impact of Mr. Nixon and Watergate on GOP candidates. Without directly crit-

icizing the President, McLaughlin red from polls and voting analyses which showed that Mr. Nixon was the prime issue in two Michigan congressional elections won by the Democrats.

But this meeting, like the public session of the Republican National Committee the following day, concluded without any consensus on how the GOP should respond to the issue.

Many Republican officials believe that the party would be in a difficult position this year even without Watergate because of the economy and because the party that holds the White House traditionally loses seats in midterm elections. On the other hand, both Bush and the Republican congressional campaign chairman, Rep. Bob Michel of Illinois, believe that it will be difficult for Democrats and their labor union allies to concentrate their resources in a general election the way they have in this year's series of special elections.

In addition to documenting Republican concern over the GOP's continuing ties to the White House, the semi-annual meeting of the national committee also demonstrated the renewed Southern strength within the councils of the party.

President Nixon has suffered a relatively smaller decline of popularity in the South than in any other region of the country, and the Southern chairmen have taken advantage of this to proclaim their loyalty to Mr. Nixon.

Freed from the necessity of having to devise a separatist strategy or of trying to subtly disassociate the party from the White House, the

Southerners have pushed ahead with their own intra-party goals with great success. Friday when the party went overwhelmingly on record against the public financing of the national political conventions.

Earlier this year the national party, with the tacit support of Bush, appeared to be lining up in support of pending legislation that would fund these conventions from a taxpayer's checkoff. But Mississippi GOP Chairman Clarke Reed asked for a delay to study the proposal and he and Georgia Chairman Bob Shaw subsequently organized the Southerners as a bloc unalterably opposed to public financing.

By the time the issue reached the national committee on Friday, the well-organized Southerners had completely routed their prospective opposition within the party.

The issue was of minor outside significance, but to many Northerners it demonstrated the shape of things to come after the 1974 elections.

Many party officials expect Republican candidates to lose seats in the Northeast and the populous urban states this fall because of the party's association with the President. But this association is not expected to be as harmful in the South, which is likely to emerge with proportionately greater strength within the Republican Party.

"The Southern strategy is all the President has left now and he knows it," complained one Northern GOP official after the Burch speech. "He can't survive without the South, and we can't survive by remaining tied to him. Clarke Reed will come out all right, whatever happens. But it's going to be a long year for the rest of us."