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The Republicans: Weary of Crises

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The overpowering sense of despair and foreboding which filled the House Republican cloakroom Tuesday morning was by no means transformed into jubilation with President Nixon's sudden surrender of the subpoenaed tape recordings at 2 p.m.

Although Republican congressmen were grateful that the crisis had diminished and immediate dangers of impeachment had disappeared, their resentment toward Mr. Nixon lingered. "Some of us are just getting tired of his crises, of his inability to run the government without another crisis," said a senior House Republican.

The bitter mood in the House cloakroom reflected a nationwide bad temper among Republicans. The President's weekend shocks produced an unexpected and unprecedented hostility among his own party's loyalists, influencing his decision to retreat on the tapes and making his presidency even more difficult into the foreseeable future.

In sum, Richard M. Nixon's prestige in his own party is at its nadir. For the first time, many Republican loyalists are looking at him not as a master politician sometimes insensitive to party interests but as a basic political incompetent, whose surprise moves derive from irresponsibility more than cunning.

Considering the trials still faced by Mr. Nixon before the Watergate affair is finally resolved, that judgment by his Republican peers could prove a severe handicap.

No such adverse Republican reaction was expected at the White House. "Sure, we're in for a fight," said a presidential aide soon after Mr. Nixon precipitated the new crisis, "but it's our kind of fight." In other words, the White House expected Mr. Nixon's Republican base to mobilize for him against his enemies.

That this would not happen and that the public reaction would differ from all previous Nixon presidential crises were apparent by Monday morning. Republican members of Congress reported the public reaction was overwhelmingly against the President. Whereas reaction to the 1970 Cambodian invasion had polarized along partisan and ideological lines, even Republican stalwarts were outraged by Mr. Nixon's actions this time.

For example, Rep. John Ashbrook found stolid Republican regulars in his conservative central Ohio district were protesting. He even received a telegram from one local party committeeman calling for Mr. Nixon's impeachment. Other Republican congressmen were amazed to find the same reaction

and duly reported it to the White House.

Typical was a meeting scheduled Tuesday between Sen. Richard Schweiker of Pennsylvania and one of his leading conservative Republican backers who had been growing increasingly restive with Schweiker's liberal positions. But instead of complaining about the senator's record as planned, the constituent spent the entire meeting protesting the President's conduct over the weekend.

Such Republican criticism can be partly traced to narrow partisan concerns. Local party leaders grumble that Mr. Nixon thoughtlessly damaged Republican candidates in the off-year elections Nov. 6. In particular, some Virginian Republicans fear heightened anti-Nixon feeling generated by the new crisis may prove the death blow to Mills Godwin in his tight race for governor.

Moreover, presidential willingness to sacrifice Elliot Richardson as Attorney General and William Ruckelshaus as Deputy Attorney General in order to get Archibald Cox's scalp as special prosecutor was not shared in the Republican hinterland. Presidential aides soon discovered that the party faithful, while shedding no tears for

Democrat Cox, regarded Richardson and Ruckelshaus as two ornaments of the administration and were bitter over their treatment.

Most disturbing to these Republicans was their feeling that Mr. Nixon had blundered badly in putting Watergate back on the front pages at a time when they felt public attention might be turning elsewhere. That criticism, indeed, is shared by Republican members of Congress. In their opinion, not even the removal of Mr. Cox made the new crisis worth while.

In the view of some suspicious Democrats, Mr. Nixon may have planned all along to capitulate on the tapes issue once Mr. Cox was disposed of. In truth, all signs at the White House point to Mr. Nixon yielding to spontaneous bipartisan tumult that neither he nor his political advisers anticipated.

Nor is it clear that he has achieved all that much in purging Mr. Cox. Mr. Nixon's surrender of the tapes has not diminished congressional pressure for a Watergate prosecution team totally independent of the White House. In the battle now forming on that issue, the President may get precious little help from resentful Republicans.