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Taking the Political Pulse

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At about the time when the President made public the data on his financial affairs and taxes, his chief aide, Gen. Alexander Haig, had a revealing encounter on Capitol Hill. The general was the guest of the Senate's Republican Conference. There was a large turn-out, and the senators were forthright.

Besides Senate Minority Leader Hugh Scott of Pennsylvania, the most insistently articulate, were two conservatives, Henry L. Bellmon of Oklahoma and John G. Tower of Texas. All three harped on the crucial importance of the President achieving what is currently called "full disclosure" before the congressional recess on Dec. 21.

General Haig apologized for the delay in putting out the documents concerning the President's financial and tax problems. He said it was occasioned by the complexity of these problems, plus the need to be unchallengeably accurate. Senator Scott replied that any delay was unfortunate; and that all the problems, like the milk people's political contributions, the ITT matter, and so on, must be covered with equal minuteness.

With support from Senators Tower and Bellmon, Senator Scott further insisted that the famous tapes, or at least those portions of them bearing on Watergate, must be included in the published material. Finally, the greatest emphasis was placed on having all these huge bundles of material before the public prior to the recess, as already mentioned.

In a rather less blunt way, the House

Republican leaders have stressed the same points. All this has a much deeper meaning, too. The truth is that the congressional leaders of the President's own party want "the people in the drugstores"—Senator Scott's phrase—to have all the facts in their hands before the senators and representatives go home for Christmas.

The Christmas congressional recess will continue for about a month. It will be the last chance senators and representatives get until late spring to make a methodical test of grassroots feelings about the President and his troubles. And that probably will be the make-or-break test for Richard M. Nixon.

The point here is simple. President Nixon can hardly continue to govern if he is utterly deserted by the members of his own party in Congress. At present, there is a strong tendency among the House and Senate Republicans to follow the rule of the slickest operator Old Virginia politics has ever produced, Sen. Claude Swanson. The Swanson rule was:

"When the water reaches the upper deck, follow the rats."

Everything will depend, however, on what the Republican—and also Democratic—senators and representatives find "the people in the drugstores" saying when they get home. There has been no time in living memory when you find so many members of Congress preparing for such methodical, intense and elaborate investigation of grassroots sentiment.

Senator Scott and the other leaders are extra eager for "full disclosure," in turn, so that grassroots sentiment can

be formed on the basis of the best facts available. If the result is strong sentiment for impeachment, impeachment will then become downright probable. If there is strong feeling that the President has been harassed enough, harassment will rapidly diminish.

The greatest risk for the President, however, is that the strongest sentiment will be a popular desire to finish quickly with the Watergate horrors at no matter what cost, including the cost of the President's resignation. With the 1974 election hanging over Congress, this kind of finding could very easily produce a deputation of Republican congressional leaders at the White House, to tell the President he must leave his office for the good of his party and his country. If he should then resist, he would be left all but friendless on Capitol Hill.

In this connection, there are other symptomatic stirrings. On the one hand, certain highly influential Democrats in the House are thinking of a joint congressional resolution somehow protecting the President from interminable subsequent investigation and even prosecution, if he finally decides to resign. The Republicans are the key; but the Democrats' idea means the Republicans will have help if they end by pushing for resignation.

On the other hand, consideration is already being given in the House to a blunt motion to impeach, which would force an immediate vote without endless delays in the House Judiciary Committee. In short, getting it over with somehow is beginning to be a more and more insistent theme.

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I'm not at all certain that things will get better here as a result of the new D.C. home rule legislation, but it's a good bet that they will get interesting.

So far as improvement is concerned, it is well to remember that "home rule" is not self-government, what with the Congress retaining control of the city's budget. Nor is doing it yourself necessarily the same thing as doing it better.

But, to repeat, it will be interesting.

Already it appears that Clifford Alexander Jr. is prepared to run for mayor. And since Walter Washington will likely find it irresistible to seek election to the job he has held by ap-