

The Harris Survey

Majority Feels Nixon Is Trying Hard

By LOUIS HARRIS

The public may be down on President Nixon over the Watergate fallout, but he has also evoked a certain amount of compassion in the process, as indicated in the 56-38 per cent majority who agree with the statement that the President "is trying to do his best in an almost impossible job."

Coupled with the 72-20 per cent who still believe Mr. Nixon is "experienced and smart, especially in foreign affairs," the fate of the beleaguered Chief Executive appears to rest on this respect for his foreign policy performance, plus public sympathy for an underdog, balanced against the deep doubts that persist about his credibility and integrity.

In the foreign policy area, Mr. Nixon continues to receive high marks. A thumping 68 per cent give him a positive rating on "working for peace in the world," and his rating is 61 per cent positive on "handling relations with Russia," 58 per cent posi-

tive in "handling relations with China," and 57 per cent on his "handling of the Middle East situation."

A substantial 82 per cent agree that "he is not afraid to take decisive action, as in his trips to Peking and Moscow and in his handling of the Middle East war."

Even in the President's most vulnerable area, the handling of the Watergate tapes, where his standing earlier this month was 84-10 per cent negative, the public has not entirely closed the door on possible ultimate presidential exoneration. For example, by 70-21 per cent, a thumping majority agrees with the statement that "if the tapes show he was not involved in the Watergate cover-up, then the country should join behind him in a show of national unity."

Although 46 per cent believe he "should not be given the benefit of the doubt in the missing tapes

controversy," almost as many, 42 per cent, believe he should.

Earlier this month, 44 per cent of the public thought the President should resign or be impeached. The critical 51 per cent, however, has not materialized. At the same time, no more than 47 per cent are willing to say they want him to remain in office.

Mr. Nixon's fate seems keyed to whatever ultimate, specific charges may be leveled against him. For example, "if the U.S. Senate Watergate committee decides that President Nixon was involved in the cover-up," a clear 54-37 per cent majority feels the Congress should impeach him. Or, "if Judge Sirica decided the President was negligent in the care he took of the Watergate tapes," then by 48-40 per cent, a plurality thinks impeachment would be in order.

The waiting period has been devastating to Mr. Nix-

on's credibility. For instance, by a record 76-19 per cent, the public agrees with the statement that he "has lost so much credibility that it will be hard to accept him again as President." By 49-37 per cent, the public no longer views him as a "man of high integrity."

Up to this point, as judged by his most recent low rating of only 30 per cent positive in his over-all job performance in the White House, and by the meager 17 per cent who express confidence in him personally, the public is not ready to conclude that Mr. Nixon should be retained on the basis alone of his skill and experience in foreign affairs, nor willing to accept that he should be given the benefit of the doubt. Perhaps the current state of President Nixon is best summed up in the 70-22 per cent who say that "he does not inspire confidence as a President should."