

# Congressmen Drink, as Ehrlichman Said, but Few

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## on the Hill Are Considered Drunkards

WASHINGTON, Aug. 8 — The Watergate investigation, permeating once hidden areas of the capital's social and political life, has focused new interest on an old subject: Congressional drinking.

Defending White House investigation of the personal habits of political critics, John D. Ehrlichman told the Senate Watergate committee last week that "someone with a serious drinking habit is of doubtful fitness for the kind of heavy duty that you bear, for instance, or that any Senator bears."

"You can go over here in the gallery," the former assistant to President Nixon said of Congress, "and watch a member totter onto the floor in a condition of at least partial inebriation."

The political opponent of such a Congressional drunk, Mr. Ehrlichman maintained, has "an affirmative obligation" to bring the fact to the attention of the voters during a campaign.

These charges angered some members, offended others and embarrassed still more, not necessarily in any relation to their personal alcoholic intake. But, most significantly, they revived the recurrent question of whether Senators and Representatives drink more, to their disability and the nation's, than ordinary people.

The answer seems to be that most Congressmen drink, a small percentage are drunkards and a few are reformed alcoholics, a situation that does not appear to have changed very much in the last 184 years.

### Decanters on Tables

When the Continental Congress sat in Philadelphia, for example, decanters of whisky were kept on tables in the rear of the chambers in Independence Hall, for the refreshment of members freshly arrived on horseback with the dust of the road in their throat.

The difference today is that Congressmen are more generally visible while their public consumption of alcohol is less so.

Washington rumor mills are quick to pick up which Congressmen were seen drunk when and where but a recent informal survey of Congress and its drinking habits would seem to indicate that the percentage of Senators and Repre-

sentatives having liquor problems may in fact be lower than that of their constituents.

In the absence of a definitive study, no one really knows the extent of the Capitol problem and no one is ever likely to. Since Congress is the source of most medical research money, asking it to fund a survey of drinking on Capitol Hill would be, in the words of one alcoholism expert, "like biting the hand that feeds us."

Discussions with Congressmen, their staff aides, employees at the Capitol and legislative hangers-on certainly indicate that drinking is part of the normal way of life in and around the halls of Congress; the use of alcohol is hearsay, but its abuse is near the national norm.

### More Freely Poured

"Someone is always wanting to offer you a drink," says Representative William R. Roy, a Democrat from Kansas, who sees liquor much more freely poured here than in his hometown of Topeka.

While liquor may be more freely available, the number of Congressmen incapacitated by performing their legislative duties is not large, Mr. Roy believes, and he should know. Mr. Roy actually is Dr. Roy, who as one of the rare phy-

sicians in Congress, has professional knowledge of alcoholism.

"I'm aware of very few people here who don't function well, and I've seen only one incapacitated by excessive drinking, but then I only see from 20 to 25 colleagues frequently and at close range," he added.

Mr. Roy's rough estimate compares well with an informal survey indicating that slightly more than a score of members of the House and Senate appear to drink to the point at which they might be considered alcoholics by some. The word "alcoholic" itself is vague. One national group recently issued an eight-page definition of what the word meant.

Assuming the score or so estimate to be correct, the incidence of alcoholism among

Congressmen is about 4 per cent, slightly lower than the widely accepted estimate of 5 per cent for the general population.

This is supported by another man who should know, Senator Harold E. Hughes, Democrat of Iowa, who readily says he still considers himself an alcoholic, although he hasn't had a drink in almost 20 years.

"I don't think alcoholism is any greater problem on Capitol Hill than in a group of professional people anywhere else in the country," he says. "If you want to drown in liquor you can in Washington, as you can anywhere else in the country."

The theme was echoed at a meeting of the Capitol Hill chapter of Alcoholics Anonymous at the Church of the Reformation, about the length of a ball of red tape from the Capitol itself.

"Things are no different here than they were in Billings, Mont., when I was on the sauce," said a member identified only as Ralph. His colleagues concurred, but one added pixieishly: "Then again, there's no law against electing an alcoholic."

### Some Hilarity

Certainly over the years a number have been elected, leading to occasionally hilarious anecdotes of the legislative luses. Among the better ones:

☞—A former West Coast Senator strode purposefully down a Capitol corridor, turned smartly to enter the hallowed upper chamber and walked directly into the wall, instead of the door, four feet away.

☞—A distinguished Senator from the South, after visiting the then Secretary of State, in his office, where foreign affairs and the quality of the bourbon being consumed were discussed, arose after the meeting and disappeared into a closet.

☞—A decade or so ago, members of the House set up an informal "board of education" headed by the Speaker, in a closely guarded room of the Capitol in which politics and branch water blended early and often.

☞—A Congressman from

New York City, now dead, once maintained a notorious "floating bar" in the back seat of an aide's car. During night sessions selected colleagues who did not rate their own hideaways in the Capitol were invited for a snort in the car parked at the entrance.

Sometimes Congressmen, automobiles and liquor have failed to blend successfully.

In 1972, Speaker Carl B. Albert, the Oklahoma Democrat who is third in succession to the Presidency, was the driver of a car that struck two vehicles on Wisconsin Avenue just before midnight.

The Washington Post quoted several witnesses, including a law student and a psychologist, as stating that Mr. Albert "was obviously drunk."

According to the witnesses,

Mr. Albert yelled as police approached: "Leave me alone, I'm Carl Albert, Speaker of the House. You can't touch me... I just got you raises."

At a subsequent news conference Mr. Albert denied that he had been intoxicated, but acknowledged in a guarded way that he "took something" during a cocktail party in Buffalo earlier in the day. His meeting with reporters was so brief, about a minute, that one Congressional aide called it "the hit and run press conference."

According to police investigators, Representative Jamie L. Whitten, Democrat of Mississippi, had been drinking before the car he was driving jumped a stop sign, struck a parked car and knocked down a brick wall in Georgetown. For his part, Mr. Whitten disputed the opinion of the patrolmen in the incident.

In December, 1971, Representative Peter N. Kyros, Democrat of Maine, was the driver

of a car that struck three others, also in Georgetown. Mr. Kyros was later quoted by The Washington Star as saying that "I had a drink or two at dinner... but I was not intoxicated."

#### A Certain Immunity

The District of Columbia police seldom press charges or otherwise intervene in a traffic accident involving a Congressman, especially since they have immunity from arrest "while going to and from the halls of Congress," a regulation that has been broadly defined here.

The last arrest of a Congressman for drunken driving occurred five years ago when the late Representative Joe Pool, a Texas Democrat, spent a night in jail in Arlington, Va., where Congress does not finance the police budget.

Most Congressmen are extremely reluctant to discuss the drinking patterns of themselves and their colleagues, although one admitted that he drank

much more here than he had back home.

Senator Harrison A. Williams, Democrat of New Jersey, refused repeated requests to discuss his own drinking problems, an issue in his re-election campaign in 1970. In making known the problem at that time he said: "I drank too much, I don't drink any more, and I feel great."

Drink has contributed to the downfall of several politicians in recent years, including former Governors Winthrop Rockefeller, Arkansas Republican; Philip H. Hoff, Vermont Democrat, and William C. Marland, West Virginia Democrat.

Mr. Rockefeller, who died in February at the age of 60, had an un concealed drinking problem in his later years that clouded his second and final two-year term as Governor, which ended in 1971.

A whispering campaign during the 1970 election campaign for Senator in Vermont led Mr. Hoff to acknowledge publicly

that he had once had a drinking problem, but had overcome it. Mr. Hoff, a former Governor of Vermont, lost the race for Senator.

Mr. Marland, at the age of 34 in 1952, was the youngest man ever elected Governor of West Virginia. He recalled later that alcoholism plagued him as Governor and led eventually to his admission to a mental hospital, a Skid Row in Chicago and a job as a taxi driver there. Before his death in 1965 at the age of 47 he was asked what had happened to himself. He answered bluntly: "Got drunk."

#### Prices Low

The quote is similar to a saying about one Northeastern Congressman here. "He doesn't drink," goes the line, "he just gets drunk and disorderly."

An aide to another Congressman from a nearby district says flatly that his boss, when he is in Washington, "is juiced by 5 every day."

Drinking seems all too easy in Washington, where conviviality is high and liquor prices are low. For example, a fifth of a best-selling Scotch, Johnnie Walker Red Label, costs with all taxes \$8.40 in midtown Manhattan, while it is \$6.29 here.

Deaths due to alcohol have gone up dramatically over the last decade here, with mortality from alcoholism quintupling and deaths from drunken driving rising from 66 to 152.

Perhaps with the statistics and the problems of its own members in mind, Congress has become aware of the increased difficulties by raising liquor taxes moderately in recent years, while voting enormous funds for the study and control of alcoholism.

Over the past three years, Congress has voted, with hardly a dissenting voice in either house, over \$300-million to combat alcoholism. In addition, it created The National Institute

on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, which now is a part of the National Institute of Mental Health.

Dr. Morris E. Chafetz, the institute's director, says "with all the embassies, lobbyists and parties going on here, one would expect that the exposure to the temptation of alcohol is somewhat greater than in other cities."

He adds, however, "that it would be a safe guess" that the alcoholism rate is about the same here as among the same group of professional people in other urban centers.

"Senators and Congressmen are people before they come here and they are no different than other people," he said.

As a conclusion, Dr. Chafetz notes that the problem of alcoholism among Congressmen is hard to define. For newspapermen as opposed to scientists to attempt it, he says, invites the adage: "People who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones."