

Watergate Haunts GOP Governors

By Lou Cannon
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ST. LOUIS, Dec. 3 —A year ago President Nixon assured the nation's Republican governors at an emotional, closed-door session in Memphis that there would be "no more bombshells" in the Watergate case. He lost his gubernatorial constituency forever the following day when the 18½-minute gap in a key White House tape was disclosed.

Outgoing Tennessee Gov. Winfield Dunn ruefully recalled the Nixon meeting today as he handed over the chairmanship of the Republican Governors Association to Missouri Gov. Christopher S. Bond. Away from the microphone, Dunn quipped to Bond that he had just received a telegram from President Ford saying that there would be no new bombshells.

It was one of the few attempts at humor during a somber, three-day session at which governors and other GOP spokesmen acknowledged that their party still is being damaged by Watergate.

"Our party was obviously gravely wounded by Watergate," Bond said in his acceptance speech. "And Watergate is not going to be put behind us as a party until we take the lead everywhere in reforming our election laws, in tightening our financial-disclosure and conflict-of-interest laws, in safeguarding our law enforcement and security agencies from being politicized, in securing the basic right of privacy for all our citizens, in opening up government to closer public scrutiny."

The scars of Watergate were

everywhere in evidence at a conference that concluded with passage of a resolution by Michigan Gov. William G. Milliken lauding former New York Gov. Nelson A. Rockefeller as "an outstanding governor" and urging his prompt confirmation as Vice President.

Only two of the four Republican governors-elect attended the conference, and five of the 18 incumbent GOP governors also were absent. Those who did attend expressed guarded public support for President Ford's economic program and private concern that he is moving too cautiously in his efforts to curb inflation and prevent a worsening recession.

Perhaps learning from their Nixon experience, the governors refrained this year from passing any customary resolution in support of the President.

Conservative governors such as Mills E. Godwin Jr. of Virginia, who classified himself as a supporter of President Ford, said that people were "impatient" with the slow pace both of Mr. Ford and of the Congress in reducing federal spending.

Godwin said the federal government must set the example

for the states by bringing its own spending under control. He also declared that the Ford proposals for budget-cutting and for raising taxes when taken together "added up to a big zero."

Milliken said he was far more concerned that the administration does not realize the full seriousness of the recession. He said he had talked inconclusively with the President and with economic policy board director L. William Seidman in behalf of a proposal that would provide an interest subsidy as an incentive for Americans to buy more cars and help Michigan's hard-pressed auto industry.

Seidman, the White House spokesman at a morning panel, won plaudits from the governors for a low-keyed discussion of the administration's economic proposals that frankly acknowledged the difficulty of simultaneously combating inflation, easing the recession and improving the country's energy position.

But several governors said afterward that they expect Mr. Ford to take more of a leadership role in trying to win congressional approval of his programs. And virtually all the governors agreed that the President's election chances in 1976 depend upon his ability to bring the economy under control.

It was this newfound realism which probably accounted for the relative lack of ideological warfare between Republican moderates and conservatives. Most governors said they agreed with the statement of South Carolina Gov.-elect James B. Edwards that people want "problem-solving, not partisanship."

In this vein, Bond opposed a proposal now being considered at the Republican National Committee to spend \$2 million on television advertising or a series of inspirational messages that would tell "the Republican story."

"I do not believe that the answer to our party's problems lies in some cosmetic approach whose focal point is an expensive advertising campaign designed to sell people on how truly great we are," Bond said. "We will not attract people to our party, or win elections, by reminding them of our glorious past, or our great historic leaders. We will attract them ... by performance."