

TIMES, THURSDAY, MAY 21, 1970

In The Nation: A Long Way to '72

By TOM WICKER

WASHINGTON, May 20— Since last May, President Nixon's lead over Senator Edmund Muskie (in a three-way race with George Wallace) has declined from a comfortable 51-33 to a close 42-38, as measured by Louis Harris just after the Cambodian invasion.

Cambodia and its tragic aftermath caused most of Mr. Nixon's slippage, five points from April to May of 1970, but the widened war in Indochina is not the only reason for the downward slide.

The tightening economy with its high interest rates and continuing inflation is a major cause. Nothing remotely comparable to the problem has been done about crime, and Administration bills for the purpose are both widely criticized as invasions of civil liberties and moving slowly, if at all, in Congress.

The Reagan Opposition

Mr. Nixon's constructive welfare proposals have run into tough going in the Senate, and it's a question, anyway, whether a measure that would cost more money and put more people on the welfare rolls would prove politically profitable, par-

ticularly with Gov. Ronald Reagan mobilizing opposition within Mr. Nixon's own party.

The President is much worse off with black voters today than he was in the beginning. Many blacks and whites believe his and Vice President Agnew's leadership has contributed to a lessening of Government support for civil rights programs and to a climate of renewed racial antagonism.

A Shaky Record

Similarly, in foreign policy, despite the high hopes Mr. Nixon brought to office, the situation in the Middle East today is more menacing by any estimate than it was in January 1969. When to all this is added the damaging setbacks the President suffered on two Supreme Court nominations, the controversy aroused by his decision to go ahead with the A.B.M., and the high-level disarray and dissension within his own official family, the kind of sixteen-month record that would be likely to win strong public support is simply not to be found.

Polls, of course, can be wrong; moreover, they can be fickle, with dismal episodes like that of Cambodia causing sharp but brief downturns, and momentary

triumphs—like President Johnson's 1967 summit conference at Glassboro—causing deceptive upswings. Democratic hopefuls, therefore, would be well advised not to count their votes before they're cast; and the most rigid truism of politics still is that "a lot can happen between now and the election."

The first thing that could happen might well be the disappearance of George Wallace from national politics. He could be defeated in the second Alabama primary on June 2, and Nixon men believe that would deliver into the President's hands the kind of conservative national majority the Wallace candidacy divided in 1968.

On the other hand, the Harris sampling suggested that Mr. Nixon might actually be weaker with Mr. Wallace out of the race. In a three-way contest, Mr. Wallace had 12 per cent to 42 for the President and 38 for Mr. Muskie; but when Mr. Wallace was eliminated, Mr. Muskie rose eight points to 46 and Mr. Nixon only four points to 48, for something near a dead heat, with 6 per cent undecided.

Mr. Harris suggests that a major factor in this result is that the end of the Wallace candidacy would make Mr. Nixon appear clearly the fa-

vored candidate of Southern conservatives, damaging him elsewhere; in the two-way pairing, Mr. Muskie carried every region of the nation except the South, which went heavily to Mr. Nixon (52-39). Moreover, this and other polls have shown the Wallace voter to be typically a protester—and in 1972, Mr. Nixon will be the man to protest against. It never has been true, for instance, that Wallace voters were motivated solely by dislike or fear of blacks; and if under the Nixon Administration these largely working-class voters continue to suffer economic hardship, they are likely to vote in 1972 for pocketbook relief rather than for more of the same.

Possible Party Insurgency

Still another possibility that might be facilitated by Mr. Wallace's defeat is a conservative insurgency within the Republic party. If Mr. Nixon continues to have difficulty in dealing with the war, the economy, blacks, students and crime, he might appear ripe for the fate of Lyndon Johnson, to either of two ready-made challengers on the right—Governor Reagan and Mr. Agnew. Judging from his policies, that is a notion that may not have escaped Richard Nixon.