

David S. Broder

Mr. Nixon And the Future Of the GOP

One year after his lonely landslide, Richard M. Nixon's presidency is tottering on the brink of political destruction. The question now facing Republican Party leaders is whether they should lock arms with the self-doomed Chief Executive and take their party to ruin with him, or seek to salvage it—and themselves—for future service to the country.

In the last few weeks, Mr. Nixon has lurched from one desperate strategem to another, in a fashion so bizarre and unpredictable as to make Spiro Agnew's conduct in his last two months in office seem orderly by comparison. If he is not attempting to conceal worse secrets than Agnew held, then the President's behavior is indeed irrational—and itself a legitimate matter of national concern.

For the country, the chief problem is how to stabilize the Nixon presidency, if that is still possible, or more likely, how to end it as promptly and painlessly as that can be done.

But the country cannot count on the President's cooperation in either of these goals. Rebuilding confidence would require total disclosure of his role in the dozens of campaign and governmental transactions now under suspicion. There is no reason to think he will be that forthcoming.

Ending his presidency painlessly would require his prompt resignation, once Gerald Ford is confirmed as Vice President. And there is no reason to think he will do that, either.

So the practical political question for Republican Party leaders is how far they are ready to go with a President who ignored them more often than not in the past and now poses a growing threat to their future.

If there were any lingering doubt that Mr. Nixon has nothing of positive political value to offer the Republican Party, which five times nominated him for national office, one simple fact should suffice.

Just across the Potomac from the White House in Virginia, one of the few statewide campaigns of any significance in this off-year has just concluded. It has been an extremely hard-fought race, and the outcome is still in doubt.

The contest provides a clean test of Mr. Nixon's theory that his personal 1972 victory would spark the emergence of a "new Republican majority." The Republican nominee is ex-Gov. Mills Godwin, a conservative Democrat who headed Mr. Nixon's campaign in Virginia last year and then formally switched to the GOP. His opponent, Lt. Gov. Henry Howell, is a populist Democrat and longtime supporter of Hubert Humphrey.

The battleground could hardly be more favorable for Mr. Nixon. He has carried Virginia every one of the five times he has appeared on the ballot there—the last time by a staggering 69 per cent.

But so great has been the damage to his political standing that Mr. Nixon has not set foot—or been importuned to campaign—in Virginia. Even there, he brings nothing to the Republican cause but the promise of ruin.

What he means to the party nationally was conveyed in dramatic form by a Harris poll early this week, which showed Republicans lagging 22 points behind the Democrats in a hypothetical national congressional contest. That points to the possibility of a GOP wipeout of 1958 or 1964 proportions—unless the situation is altered.

The time for Republicans to salvage their future by cutting loose from the crippled President is short. And their motive for doing so is as obvious as it is justified. The Republican Party is not the source of Mr. Nixon's problems, and there is no nobility in its becoming the victim of them.

Indeed, if freed from the incubus of Mr. Nixon's vagaries, Republicans would have a bright future. The record and leadership of the Democratic Congress do not inspire confidence.

Republicans have a range of attractive presidential prospects spanning the party spectrum, while the Democrats are paralyzed—and polarized—by the problematical bid of Sen. Edward M. Kennedy.

In no way other than the Nixon problem are the Republicans at a disadvantage. And they have an opportunity soon to do something about that.

At the urging of Gerry Ford, Republican National Chairman George Bush has called a meeting of the Republican Coordinating Committee for Nov. 12.

This group—including two living former presidential candidates, six Senate and nine House leaders, five governors and a half dozen national committee officials—represents the collective leadership of the Republican Party.

It has not met since May of 1968, when it completed a successful four-year process of negotiating the reunification of party positions that had been shattered in the 1964 election debacle.

Bush says, "I don't think there will be any sentiment there for running away from the President, but there is a recognition that the Republican Party is an ongoing thing, while the President has run his last campaign." In any event, the reconvening of this group is a timely expression of Republican awareness of the need to separate the party's future from Mr. Nixon's.