

NYTimes **The Guilty Party** NOV 19 1973

By William Safire

WASHINGTON, Nov. 18—"If the Nixon problem is not resolved," warns the editorial voice of The New York Times, "the Republican party will suffer a political holocaust in the 1974 and 1976 elections."

Is this true? If the party does not dump the President—that is what "resolving the Nixon problem" means—will Democrats be able to bedevil the next generation of Republicans with Watergate as they flayed a past generation with memories of the Depression?

First, grant the damage: though Republicans will claim they had nothing to do with the Nixon campaign of 1972, much less the Watergate break-in, their protestations will cut no ice: Mr. Nixon was their candidate, and the headquarters bugged at 2600 Virginia Avenue in Washington was not the Republican headquarters.

Fairly or not, candidates of "the party of the people" will be inveighing against "the party of the plumbers" for years to come, just as F.D.R., while running against Landon, Willkie and Dewey, always ran against Hoover. Watergate will have its political cost whether or not Republicans seek political absolution by offering up their leader as a sacrifice.

But will that cost be a holocaust? Let's examine how Watergate will fall out on different groups of Republicans:

1. *Incumbent Republican officeholders.* "If Nixon is still at 27 per cent next year," a Senator up for re-election in 1974 told me, "I'm dead." But the President's future unpopularity will not be based on Watergate alone: "Next year," says another Congressman, "I'll worry most about a gas shortage at harvest time."

Most Republican Congressmen view an impeachment vote as a loser either way: whatever their decision, they would lose more support than they would gain among their constituents.

That is why we now hear "get it over with" talk, which is a Congressman's way of setting up an alibi: "I only voted to impeach him so he could clear himself, not because I was against him." That won't wash: there is no way for most Congressmen to cast a vote for or against impeachment without damaging themselves.

Republican incumbents are right to be worried about 1974, though not primarily because of Watergate: of much greater concern to them is the state of the economy a year from now.

2. *Potential Republican candidates against Democratic officeholders.* So

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far, we have seen Republican National Chairman George Bush walk away from an opportunity to be Governor of Texas and Representatives disavowing any intent to run for the Senate, which makes it seem that a Republican nomination is hardly a plum.

But in a few months, with investigators hot on the Chisholm trail, and after the exposure of irregularities in the financing of other Democratic candidates, the way will be clear for campaigns based on an elemental appeal: "All politicians are crooks."

Such an appeal is unfair, untrue and unavoidable. Next year will be the year of the reformer—whom New York former Mayor Jimmy Walker defined as "the guy who rides through a sewer in a glass-bottomed boat."

More significant than a party label will be a nonpolitical background: The slogan will be "inexperience counts." In such a melee, the losses of Republican incumbents could well be offset, at least in part, by the gains of fresh-faced Republican challengers.

3. *The Republican foot-soldier.* More important than the orankers of mimeo machines at party headquarters who make up what is called the "party leadership," more important than the ideologues who sally forth from the Ripon Society and the human events crowd to tug the party philosophy left or right—is the stalwart who goes out on a rainy day to vote in a Republican primary.

What about the Republican foot-soldier? Does he feel betrayed? Yes. Does he feel guilty? No. Does he feel he must resolve "the Nixon problem" before he can see his party triumphant at the local level? Of course not. And those who threaten to punish him with a political holocaust only cause him to stretch his nostril wide.

The different elements of the Republican party will bear the Watergate cross—or banish it—in varying ways, but its members can remember that only nine years ago there were dire predictions of the party's demise after the Goldwater debacle.

The Republican party is not a guilty party. It hopes that an uneasy peace and a hard-to-enjoy prosperity will help it roll with the punch. And even unpopular Richard Nixon is not without a perverse political clout; if a Congressman steps out of line, the President can threaten to come to his district at election time and campaign in his support.