

FEB 16 1974

WXPost
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Conservatives and the 'Nixon Sell-Out'

Although the meeting Feb. 6 between President Nixon and 21 conservative House Republicans opened with applause for Mr. Nixon and ended with handshakes, these amenities were merely veneer for seething anti-Nixon sentiment by the entire conservative Republican establishment.

In fact, the 90-minute Cabinet room session with the informal Steering Group of hard-line conservatives in the House never did come to real grips with what one conservative labeled "the Nixon sellout" of their position on issue after issue.

That sellout, conservatives agree, has its source in Watergate and the conviction that the President's new budget is designed to appease the main force

of his enemy: liberals of both parties. Rep. Edward Derwinski of Illinois, leader of the Steering Group, told us after the session that the President was politely warned he "could not placate his liberal critics with this new deficit budget and program."

"He is capitulating to the wrong people at the wrong time on the wrong issues," Derwinski said. "There is still a silent majority but the President forgot that fact."

The reason Derwinski went to the White House with the ideological hard core of Republican conservatives was to stiffen the President's back against liberal programs which, in earlier Nixon years, would have been automatically vetoed. Their message: Mr.

President, don't underestimate conservative votes in the House in deciding whether to veto; we promise you the same backing to sustain vetoes this year as last.

Thus, Derwinski produced for the President tally sheets of House votes to override presidential vetoes in 1973 showing that the 21 conservatives cast a cumulative total of 110 votes to sustain last year's six vetoes, with only 10 cumulative votes to override (and 6 abstentions).

The conservatives fear that Mr. Nixon will be frightened out of vetoes because of his dangerously weakened political position. What's more, this re-

treat would come on top of his new deficit budget (nearly \$10 billion in the red), his medical care program, his public service employment program and, most important, his return to a liberalized, family assistance cash payments plan.

For all the amenities at the White House, the conservatives received no commitments on four specific issues.

They asked the President, first, to solicit Republican backing for an anti-busing constitutional amendment. Mr. Nixon's reply posed a dubious thesis: my four appointees to the Supreme Court are the best guarantee on the busing issue.

The other three issues, each a flaming red flag to conservatism: long-term federal subsidies for mass transit operating costs; the proposed legal services corporation; a pending Democratic-sponsored bill backed by environmentalists which would establish federal limits on uncontrolled use of lands.

The President listened respectfully, indicating sympathy but avoiding commitment. Moreover, several felt he personally had not begun to count noses on forthcoming House votes, because of impeachment distractions.

More important, the conservatives felt that in his political agony Mr. Nixon has given up defending against vast spending programs likely to be enacted by the Democratic Congress. They see him using the threat of recession as an obvious pretext for federal pump-priming.

The session broke up without overt ill-feeling: no blows struck, no harsh criticisms uttered. But as an effort to tweek the President's conscience on what conservatives regard as his surrender of principle, it proved, in the words of a participant, only that "he has thrown in the sponge and he doesn't even care."

That feeling is shared by some presidential intimates within the very bowels of the White House. What disturbs them is that, with the possible exception of the health plan, the new budget includes no special help for the blue-collar working man, successfully courted by Mr. Nixon during his first term but now alienated from him by Watergate.

"All this Moynihan Mickey Mouse," grumbled one such aide. "It's cash for the poor but nothing for our own new voters." He wants not pump-priming on new welfare programs but a fat tax cut for the blue-collar working class, if Mr. Nixon is all that frightened by incipient recession.

But that would make political sense, a commodity which, in the unanimous view of the whole conservative establishment, cannot be found today at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.

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