

Michigan Loss Dismays GOP

By Lou Cannon

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Republican National Chairman George Bush said yesterday that the stunning Democratic upset victory in a Michigan congressional district has raised anew the question of whether "Watergate might destroy the Republican Party."

Bush said he was "still confident" that Republicans can win in the November elections by defending the record of President Nixon, but he admitted a deep concern over the surprise victory of Democrat Richard F. VanderVeen.

VanderVeen defeated

heavily favored state Sen. Robert VanderLaan in the Michigan congressional district formerly represented by Vice President Ford. The district had been held by the GOP since 1910 and gave Ford 62.3 per cent of the vote in 1972.

Democrats were jubilant about the apparent prospects of a November landslide.

"It means that the Democrats are going to sweep the nation this year," said House Speaker Carl Albert of Oklahoma.

The specific concern of Republicans was that VanderVeen won his upset vic-

tory by changing tactics in mid-campaign and conducting his campaign squarely against the President.

According to his Boston-based political consultant, John Martilla, VanderVeen was trailing 60 to 28 per cent in a Jan. 15 poll of the district. But the poll also showed that a majority of the voters believed the President was directly involved in the Watergate scandal and should resign.

VanderVeen spent the rest of the campaign attacking President Nixon and proclaiming that Ford would make a better President.

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GEORGE BUSH
... admits concern

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"For the Republicans, being a company man in 1974 is going to be a liability," Martilla said in assessing the outcome.

Republicans made no effort to disguise their surprise and disappointment, although they differed as to the reasons for the defeat.

Ford himself acknowledged that Watergate played a role but he assigned a larger share of the loss to the "temporary turmoil" caused by layoffs and the energy crisis in Michigan.

William McLaughlin, the GOP state chairman, said that "everything went our way except Watergate. That killed us."

Bush said he didn't know which of these issues was the specific cause of the defeat but called upon Republicans to counterattack against the Democrats in the special elections ahead. Speaking to a luncheon session of the National Republican Heritage Groups Council, Bush said:

"If we're going to take the heat on Watergate, let's by God give them hell on the issues that are fundamental to the life, death and the welfare of the American people."

It has long been Bush's contention that voters would not blame the Republican Party for the Watergate scandal. He said in an interview yesterday that he is no longer sure that this is true but hopes it will be in November when "hopefully Watergate will be behind us."

Both Democratic and Republican political strategists said they expected candidates to draw lessons from the election in other forthcoming special elections in Michigan and Ohio.

"Our candidate in Pennsylvania literally ran away from the Watergate issue and we scored a very narrow victory," said one Democratic strategist. "That isn't likely to happen again."

A Republican strategist predicted that GOP candidates in the forthcoming elections would put "the greatest possible distance between themselves and President Nixon."

Rep. John Ashbrook (R-Ohio), a conservative challenger to Mr. Nixon for the presidential nomination in 1972, said "shock waves will reverberate" in Congress if the Republicans lose a special election March 5 to fill a GOP seat vacated by Rep. William Keating.

"I don't think the fate of the Republican Party should be tied to his (Nixon's) sinking ship," Ashbrook said. "The loyalty principle is still the greatest single principle in politics. But if you want loyalty you can always join the Mafia."

Other Republican congressmen also were pessimistic.

Minority Leader John Rhodes of Arizona said "we took a kicking" and blamed it on the layoff of oil workers in the Michigan district. But he conceded that Watergate was a factor along with a presumed low turnout of Republican voters in the election.

Rep. Barber Conable (R-N.Y.) said he was "distressed" by the result though not convinced that it signified a Republican "disaster" in November. However, Conable said the election will have several negative effects on the GOP.

"It will distract a lot of congressmen from their governmental responsibilities and turn their attention to politics," he said. "Secondly, it makes it harder to attract good Republican candidates at a time when we need them, and third, it will tempt the opposition to put more money in districts they normally wouldn't think attainable."

There was some attempt by White House spokesmen to minimize the importance of the election — though no one tried to hide disappointment at the result.

"We were overconfident because of Jerry's lopsided victories of the past," said Counselor Anne Armstrong.

White House press secretary Ronald L. Ziegler said that problems of the economy and the energy shortage had an effect and that it would be "hard for me to say" whether Watergate was a factor.

There was no doubt about

the Watergate factor as far as AFL-CIO — President George Meany was concerned. He said VanderVeen's victory was "a definite indication that the people don't want Watergate to go away and do want Mr. Nixon to go away."

"The best service Nixon could perform for the country would be to spare us the trauma of impeachment and resign," Meany said.

This also was the view

of VanderVeen, who said his main goal as a freshman congressman will be the removal of President Nixon from office.

VanderVeen relied on targeted mailings to Democrat, trade unionists, ethnic groups, blacks and Catholics to get out a favorable vote. He worked from lists supplied primarily by the United Auto Workers.