

Nixon Links Watergate, Mich. Defeat

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President Nixon yesterday reportedly conceded that Watergate was a factor in the Republican loss of Vice President Ford's old Michigan congressional district this week but added that special elections are not necessarily harbingers of general elections.

House Minority Leader John Rhodes of Arizona, who relayed the President's comment to newsmen, said the President believed that unemployment and energy shortages in the district also contributed to the GOP defeat.

Mr. Nixon, who was a central issue in the campaign because of Watergate and his handling of energy and economic matters, has refused to make any public comment on the victory of Richard F. VanderVeen, the first Democrat to win the seat since 1910.

Other Republicans, however, have been busily analyzing and discussing the upset in terms of their own campaigns this year—and in terms of their relations with Mr. Nixon.

Normally after a congressional leadership meeting, Rhodes and Senate Minority Leader Hugh Scott of Pennsylvania meet reporters in the White House press room to report on the discussions.

But yesterday deputy press secretary Gerald L. Warren said that the leaders were too busy to appear, suggesting White House reluctance to have the issue discussed further. Warren himself gave a report on the leadership meeting although he had not been present.

Rhodes, who talked with reporters on Capitol Hill, said that the President discussed the election briefly with a group of fellow Republicans after the Cabinet room meeting.

Warren told reporters that the election was not discussed in the more than two hours the leaders spent with Mr. Nixon around the Cabinet table.

After the meeting, the President did bring the matter up.

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Rhodes said, and expressed disappointment at the outcome.

While he probably did not use the word 'Watergate,' he implied it by citing the overall political situation in the country," Rhodes said.

"I believe he also made the point that these special elections are not necessarily harbingers of what will happen in the general election."

Ford said Tuesday night that he would tell the President "Watergate was an issue, but underlying problems were the economy and the energy crisis."

After the leadership meeting, the President and Ford conferred privately for about 40 minutes, Warren said. He would not say what they talked about.

When asked if the Michigan upset would result in new pressure on the President to resign, Rhodes replied: "I would doubt it."

But he said that if the GOP lost the next two special congressional elections—in Ohio and California—Republicans would "certainly have to readress their whole strategy in November."

"I don't think any Republican candidate can or should take the hair shirt for Watergate," Rhodes commented. "He should say, 'Here it is. It's terrible. I don't like it. But the Republican Party did not do it.'"

The meeting in the Cabinet room was devoted primarily to a discussion of campaign reform proposals, Warren said, with the President eliciting views from those present.

In his State of the Union address last month, Mr. Nixon promised to send Congress his own proposals for campaign reform since Congress refused last year to back him in the creation of a special commission to study the problem.

White House sources said the President's proposals may be ready within two weeks and will include the issues of campaign financing, limitations on spending and contributions, and campaign practices, including penalties for dirty tricks.

The President continues to oppose public financing of campaign costs, it was emphasized.

The President reportedly will meet here Friday with representatives of the National Citizens' Committee for Fairness to the Presidency.

Rabbi Baruch Korff, chairman of the group, announced that a luncheon would be held at the Mayflower to pay tribute to the President for "the era of peace he inaugurated." The White House would not confirm the report that the President would attend.

The committee announcement said that the Vice President and Secretary of Agriculture Earl L. Butz also would speak.