

A Message From Home

By Tom Wicker

IN THE NATION

It is not at all surprising that Democrats on the House Judiciary Committee stiffened their posture on Richard Nixon's possible impeachment just two days after a Democratic candidate won the supposedly safe Republican Congressional seat that Gerald Ford had given up in Michigan.

Not only did Richard VanderVeen, the Democrat, take about 51 per cent of the vote in the Grand Rapids district where Mr. Ford and predecessor Republicans usually could count on about 60 per cent; he did it in a campaign strongly alleging Mr. Nixon's inability to govern and calling for his resignation or removal. The VanderVeen triumph followed, moreover, a Democratic victory—even if by only a few hundred votes—in a usually Republican district in Pennsylvania.

No wonder Mr. Ford himself said he was "frightened" by the outcome in his home district. No wonder, either, that Judiciary Committee Democrats, as one of them put it, "took courage" from the Michigan vote.

They decided to move quickly and directly to obtain certain items of evidence pertinent to the impeachment inquiry from the White House; that should speed the day of confrontation if Mr. Nixon, as so far indicated, does not intend to cooperate with that inquiry. The committee also decided to set its own rules on the confidentiality of evidence obtained from the White House, rather than letting Mr. Nixon's attorneys impose them on the House.

It was always predictable that as the true depth of Mr. Nixon's unpopularity in the country became apparent to members of the House, their willingness to entertain the idea of impeachment would be expanded. As these members conduct their own campaigns for re-election, meanwhile watching the progress of special elections—others are due soon in Ohio and California—that appears to be just what is happening.

Nor is it only Watergate that plagues Mr. Nixon and the Republicans inevitably linked to him. In the Grand Rapids campaign, for instance, the Republican candidate was of the incumbent party, both nationally and in the district; Mr. Ford said that therefore "uncertain economic conditions" hurt him, and undoubtedly, the long lines at the gasoline pump did him no good.

Such economic issues often plague an incumbent President and his party in a mid-term election. Usually, however, such a President does not have hanging over his head the sword of impeachment on another matter. The hard fact is that if an impeachment charge on Watergate issues is brought against Mr. Nixon in the House, other potent forces will be at work, too; the

heat members of Congress are feeling on economic and energy questions will make it all the easier for them to vote for impeachment on the Watergate charge.

Moreover, the months or weeks before such a vote can be taken are going to be marked with recurring echoes of Watergate. The Stans-Mitchell trial is under way in New York; the Chapin trial is being held in Washington; indictments developed by the special prosecutorial staff are about to be made public; the controversy over the availability and authenticity of the White House tapes is continuing; in April another Congressional committee is due to deliver its verdict on Mr. Nixon's income tax returns. Just this week, a Texas lawyer was indicted on a charge of lying to a grand jury about dairy industry contributions to the 1972 Nixon campaign. This monotonous cannonade of events is bound to make it easier for members to vote for, not against impeachment, when the moment comes.

Republicans campaigning this year are in a particular bind. They can attract independent and perhaps even some Democratic support by dissociating themselves from Mr. Nixon; but they risk alienating their hard-core Republican support if they disavow Mr. Nixon altogether. In a highly important sense, even this dilemma may pose a serious difficulty for him.

In a stand-up-and-be-counted impeachment vote on the floor of the House, a Republican voting for impeachment will be voting, after all, only to submit the Nixon matter to the Senate (where conviction requires a two-thirds vote) for a trial on the merits of the case. A Republican so voting can explain to his constituents that his vote gives Mr. Nixon a chance to confront his accusers and clear himself. He can show by his vote for impeachment, as a member of the Judiciary Committee has put it, that he is "not part of the cover-up" but is not necessarily "against the Commander in Chief." A vote for impeachment, by late spring or early summer, may, in fact, have become the "safe vote."

On the other hand, a vote against impeachment will be a flat vote for Mr. Nixon's exoneration—a denial that probable cause for his trial exists, an assertion that Mr. Nixon has done nothing and is responsible for nothing for which he need even be called to account. The news from Gerald Ford's hometown, for anyone who has to face the electorate in November, was that such a vote will be hard to cast this summer. Not many opponents would fail to call it a "cover-up" vote.
