

Nixon and Impeachment

By Mervin D. Field

Many people in California today — almost half — believe that President Nixon should face impeachment charges as a result of Watergate and its aftermath. Another one in four believes he should resign. Fewer than one in four persons thinks the investigations should be dropped.

A large majority of the people feel President Nixon is obstructing the Watergate investigation, and the prevailing belief now is that the president had at least some idea of what his subordinates were doing. A substantial number are ready to believe that he approved of, or even took an active part in planning, what was done.

These findings are indicated in a recent public opinion survey made by the California Poll among a cross-section of the adult population of California. Interviews with 1179 people were conducted during February 2 through February 11.

The California public as a whole, the poll shows, takes a rather stern view of the president's role in Watergate and other matters involving White House staff wrongdoing. Just 9 per cent of the public endorses Mr. Nixon's statement that he knew nothing about the Watergate activities while they were being planned, carried out, and subsequently covered up. The public sees Mr. Nixon having some definite involvement in the affair, including belief that he took an active part in planning it (15 per cent), that he knew about it and approved it (35 per cent), or that he had some idea of what was going on* (39 per cent). This amounts to 89 per cent who do not believe Mr. Nixon's statements that he was innocent of any knowledge about what was happening.

Nixon's involvement in Watergate—	Statewide
He took active part in planning	15%
He knew and approved, but no personal part	35
He had some idea of what was going on	39
He knew nothing at all about it	9
No opinion	8

The president has also said that he is cooperating with the various investigative bodies, but today most people (69 per cent) believe the opposite, namely that he is obstructing the investigation. Just 16 per cent think he is helping all he can.

Nixon role in the investigation—	Statewide
Helping all he can	16%
Obstructing investigation	69
Neither, staying neutral	11
No opinion	4

Most of the public thinks either that Mr. Nixon should resign outright (24 per cent) or that Congress should bring charges against him and take a vote of impeachment (46 per cent). Just about one person in five (23 per cent) thinks Congress should drop further investigations of Mr. Nixon.

What Nixon/Congress should do—	Statewide
Nixon should resign	24%
Congress should bring charges and take an impeachment vote	46
Congress should drop further investigations	23
Other, don't know	7

There are marked differences of opinion by political party affiliation about the degree of President Nixon's involvement and what should be done about it. A large majority of California rank-and-file Democrats (67 per cent) feel he took an active part or at least approved the plans, while only a few Republicans (21 per cent) feel he was this much implicated. A majority of Republicans, however, concede that he probably had some idea of what was going on.

On the question of impeachment, Democrats and Republicans are more nearly in agreement that charges should be brought and the matter settled. The largest number of Republicans, however, would like to see the investigations dropped. One in three California Democrats wants to see the president resign.

Nixon's involvement—	Dem.	Rep.
Active part in planning	24%	3%
Knew and approved but no personal part	43	18
Had some idea of what was going on	28	55
Knew nothing about it	3	20
No opinion	2	4

What Nixon/Congress Should do—	Dem.	Rep.
Nixon resign	34%	10%
Congress bring impeachment charges and take a vote	49	38
Congress drop further investigation	11	42
Other, don't know	6	10

Mr. Nixon has suffered a marked loss in public support for the job he is doing as president. (An earlier article by The California Poll reported that the president's "good job" rating index had slipped to an unprecedented low of 18 per cent. His "poor job" rating had soared from 16 per cent in 1970 to 47 per cent today.) While this can be traced in large part to public concerns about inflation and effects of the current oil shortage, there is no question that there is also an underlying loss of confidence in the president's credibility and leadership capabilities as a result of Watergate.

Another factor that may be responsible for increased public receptivity to the idea of Mr. Nixon's leaving the presidency before his term expires is the presence in office of a more acceptable alternative in the person of Gerald Ford, the new vice president. When Spiro Agnew was vice president, many people were uneasy or negative about his ability to be president even before his involvement in the Maryland bribery scandal came to light. Ford is held in much higher esteem than Agnew was by voters of all persuasions. Today, even a majority of Democrats in California concede that Ford would do at least a "fair job" and relatively few feel he would be a "poor" president.

Believe as President Ford would do:	All voters	Democrats	Republicans
Good job	21%	16%	30%
Fair job	37	39	34
Poor job	12	16	6
No opinion	30	20	30