



Prospects Changing On Impeachment

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UP TO NOW most of the Congress has tended to regard Watergate as a media event. But criminal indictments, as Dr. Johnson once said about the prospect of hanging, tend to concentrate the mind.

As never before, Republicans now see that association with the Nixon Administration is politically disastrous, while Democrats sense an enormous opportunity in taking on the President. Thus the odds on impeachment have shifted dramatically.

Only the seven Senators on the special investigating committee headed by Sam Ervin have so far had to come directly to grips with Watergate. For the rest of the Congress, the scandal has been something they saw on television or read about, very unsystematically, in the papers. They and their constituents have focused their attention on such immediate and direct concerns as inflation and energy.

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THE CRIMINAL indictments change that outlook. They constitute a solemn assertion that a score of persons intimately associated with President Nixon were engaged in unmistakably criminal activities involving flagrant abuse of power and gross obstruction of justice. Moreover, a train of events is set in motion which cannot go away. There will be arrangements, pleas, and public trials with dramatic confrontations of witnesses stretching out for months to come.

So impeachment now shapes up as a practical decision on which the congress will have to take a stand.

As Republicans examine the prospect, they can see that support for the Presi-

dent means terrible trouble. Not only have they lost recent congressional elections in Grand Rapids, Mich., and Johnstown, Pa., but there is an intriguing poll of 11 states taken by Barry Goldwater, the conservative Senator from Arizona, in November and January. The November poll showed that Democrats and Republicans both suffered in equal measure from Watergate. The January poll showed that the Republicans were down by 10 per cent below the Democrats.

What happened in between? Well, there was "Operation Candor," in which the President deliberately associated himself with the Republican Party. As a result Republicans closely connected with Mr. Nixon are now taking their distances from him.

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ON THE Democratic side there is a sudden realization that going hard at the President can pay big dividends. The Democrats only last year ran behind the Republicans by 2-to-1 when the question of ability to deal with crime was posed. Now they are six points ahead. In the matter of honesty in government, they are 26 points ahead where only a year ago they were 40 points behind.

One result is that the Democratic leadership is beginning to swing much harder on Watergate than in the past.

What all this means is that Watergate, for the first time, is now coming before the Congress on the merits of the case. The merits of the case are so overwhelming that the House is going to find it very difficult to avoid voting articles of impeachment.