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GOP Keeping Mr. Nixon At Arm's Length

The reek of White House scandals in the wreckage of three major Republican losses in special congressional elections has brought this panicky reaction from top party leaders: future Republican candidates must totally insulate themselves and their campaigns from any connection with or help from the Nixon administration.

That word soon will be gingerly passed to the White House, where President Nixon's politics-as-usual rule still governs, despite the ravages of Watergate.

The rule was applied a day or two before Republican Willis Gradison Jr., was defeated in Ohio's strongly Republican 1st congressional district,

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when the White House sent this urgent command to Secretary of the Interior Rogers Morton: go to Cincinnati and campaign for Gradison.

Wise old pro Morton balked. Instead of going, he checked with the Republican congressional campaign committee. Forget it, he was told; the last thing we want for Gradison is any new connection with the Nixon administration.

The White House call to Morton followed an earlier frantic effort to intervene just after the Republican disaster in Vice President Gerald Ford's old Michigan district. A Nixon aide, presumably with the President's personal blessing, telephoned a high official at the Republican National Committee to demand: why haven't we been getting our Cabinet troops into these special election campaigns?

The only Republican victory in the four special elections so far this year came Tuesday in California's 13th district, where the no-interference-from-Washington rule was scrupulously followed. That, combined with a highly favorable district and an overwhelmingly superior candidate, meant Republican victory.

The fear of Watergate taint is also limiting administration attendance at the party's regional meetings. Not a single White House political aide or a single member of the Nixon Cabinet has been invited to the Midwest regional meeting late this month in Chicago. The only bigwigs invited are national chairman George Bush and two top domestic aides vitally concerned with key issues: energy czar William Simon and Herbert Stein, chairman of the Council of Economic Advisers.

Behind this party effort to neutralize the Nixon-Watergate drag is a growing consensus among party leaders around the country that the Nov. 5 general election will be a disaster—if Mr. Nixon is still in the White House.

Thus, a shrewd party operative says the election will turn on one question: "Who will be President of the U.S. on Nov. 5th?" In full agreement, many state party leaders for the first time are sending a series of SOS's here practically begging the President to resign, even though no one feels there is any chance. Yet, continued rapid deterioration of the party as shown by the loss of three strongly Republican congressional seats seem assured without it.

The signs are overwhelming. In the 5th district of Wisconsin, for example, 11 state legislative seats will be on the block in November; so far, there is no Republican candidate in any of them. The 5th district is strongly Democratic, but Republicans contested every assembly seat there in 1972 and came close to winning three.

In the South, where the party had spectacular successes under President Nixon, one state leader concedes for the first time that "candidates aren't recruitable for us Republicans as easily as they used to be."

Equally ominous for Mr. Nixon is the tendency of rank-and-file Republicans holding elective office to say out loud what they have been saying only in strict privacy for the past six months. Rep. Pierre duPont of Delaware, a 39-year-old Republican moderate, dramatized this new tendency in a little-noticed talk in Wilmington last week.

DuPont severely criticized Bush for "going around the country saying that the American voter is fair and will not take Watergate out on me" and other Republican officeholders. Declaring Bush tragically "wrong," duPont said

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that "unless something is done, George Bush is going to preside over one of the worst debacles the Republican Party or any party has ever seen in the annals of our country. 1974 is going to make the Goldwater election look like a Republican victory."

What duPont is pushing fits with the post-Ohio mood in high party levels here: Republican candidates can no longer try skirting Watergate but must talk about the scandals, urge a clean-up and keep far, far away from the Nixon administration.

That means far more candor in discussing Watergate and far less charity in handling the Nixon problem. With Mr. Nixon on record—that defense of the presidency has higher priority than the fate of the Republican Party—that should be easy