

Turning Back the Political

WINSTON-SALEM, N.C. — The uncertainty of coping politically with Watergate in the South was behind the evasion by state Atty. Gen. Robert Morgan at a recent press conference here when asked about President Nixon's continuing troubles.

Democrat Morgan, the most likely successor to retiring Sen. Sam Ervin in this year's election, experienced no such trouble reacting to Mr. Nixon in 1972 when Morgan was re-elected attorney general and the President carried North Carolina in a landslide. Morgan then did not hide his admiration for Mr. Nixon's successful Vietnam policy. But at the press conference here, he bailed out, lamely contending he could not talk about the President because — someday, maybe — he would serve in the Senate as a juror in an impeachment trial.

Morgan bailed out because neither he nor anybody else is sure of the 1974 Nixon impact in North Carolina or any Southern state. While the President's popularity has not reached the depths in this region that it has elsewhere, his stigma still might help reverse a growing trend toward a two-party North Carolina.

More than any other Southern state except Virginia, North Carolina had followed the classic formula for Re-

publican victory in Dixie: liberals winning Democratic primaries and then losing to conservative Republicans in November. But that formula, which helped elect a Republican governor and senator in 1972, is now threatened by Watergate — and Bobby Morgan.

Morgan, 48, is a throwback to shrewd courthouse Democratic politicians of the old one-party South — canny, nonideological and supremely flexible. He broke into statewide politics in 1960 managing the unsuccessful campaign for governor against racial moderate Terry Sanford by Dr. I. Beverley Lake, now a state supreme court justice and then a major segregationist voice for the South. Later, Morgan defended the notorious law banning Communists and fellow-travelers from speaking at state universities here.

"We can't forgive Morgan," one North Carolina liberal told us, "but I expect most everybody else has forgotten."

Indeed, with segregation a dead issue, Morgan has concentrated on cultivating a neo-populist image as a consumer advocate. As for old feuds, Morgan supported Sanford (now president of Duke University) against George Wallace in the 1972 North Carolina presidential primary.

But Morgan is keeping far away

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from the liberal label that destroyed former Democratic Rep. Nick Galifianakis (now opposing Morgan in the May 7 Democratic primary) in his losing 1972 Senate race against Republican super-conservative Jesse Helms. Morgan declined to campaign for Galifianakis against Helms because he supported end-the-Vietnam war resolutions in Congress. In contrast, Morgan wrote the President in 1972 commending his Vietnam policy.

That attitude is not so hopelessly out of date in the South today as elsewhere. Uncle Sam Ervin may have made himself a folk hero on the west side of Manhattan because of the Watergate hearings. But, politicians here generally agree, he hurt himself back home. When Ervin found that Morgan was spending so much money that he clearly intended to run for the Senate, Ervin pulled out rather than undergo a grueling primary race at age 77.

Since Ervin's withdrawal, Morgan has finessed the Nixon question. He has systematically thrown out anti-Nixon speech drafts from one liberal-leaning research assistant. Nevertheless, he hopes the President's decline will undercut Republican morale here.

It has eliminated the potentially strongest candidate, Rep. Wilmer

(Vinegar Bend) Mizell. After consulting both his Bible and some gloomy polls, ex-baseball pitcher Mizell decided to stick to his safe House seat. The Republican nominee will be political neophyte William Stevens, a Broyhill Industries (furniture) executive and brother-in-law of Rep. James Broyhill.

All this has the earmarks of Democratic politics in one-party days: an ideological neutral winning the Democratic primary without trouble and then going on to vanquish an unknown Republican challenger.

But the past has by no means returned intact. Galifianakis' late, unexpected entry into the primary makes life more difficult for Morgan. Whatever President Nixon's slump in the state, Republican Gov. James Holshouser is well-respected, well-liked and intent on electing a second Republican senator.

The outcome could cast light on the future politics of the South. How can Democrats stop the Republican Southern surge? "By nominating Democrats like me," Morgan told us. A combination of his old-style politics and the ripples of Watergate, however faint in this region, could turn back the political clock here.