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The Bombshell of Senator Buckley

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JAMES BUCKLEY, the conservative-Republican from New York, is not exactly what they call a whale in the Senate. It is a rare day when anybody notices what he says; rarer still when somebody cares enough to argue with him.

But it wasn't that way last week when he called on President Nixon to step down. Within hours Mr. Nixon himself had made response in a question-and-answer session in Houston. Vice President Gerald Ford and Barry Goldwater, the conservative leader in the Senate, took issue with Buckley. Robert Griffin, the Republican whip in the Senate who has himself flirted with a dump-Nixon move, said of the Buckley statement: "It will have a profound impact."

It will, and the reasons go to the heart of Mr. Nixon's standing in the Congress and the country. In the country, Mr. Nixon has a low reservoir of popular support. The Gallup Poll shows him holding about 25 per cent approval — a good deal less than half of what he had when he began his second term.

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THE PUBLIC seems, moreover, to be warming to the idea that the President should quit or be forced from office. Peter Hart, who is now emerging as one of the country's best opinion-samplers, has taken a series of polls in three Northeastern states which show an unmistakable evolution.

Up to last month, a majority in all three states opposed the ouster of the President. The February results, which have just been tabulated, show that in all three states a majority favors ouster of the President.

Turning that opinion around is going to be extremely hard for Mr. Nixon. For a whole variety of polls show that people simply don't trust him.

Public mistrust of Mr. Nixon has found only muffled expression in the Congress for two reasons. For one thing Democrats have been unwilling to pile it on the President. Almost to a man senior Democrats say that it would be a disaster if impeachment became a partisan issue. Republicans, on the other hand, are chary of breaking with their leader.

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BUCKLEY'S statement was a cannonade right in the middle of a delicately poised balance. His argument went to the heart of Mr. Nixon's claim that attacks on him were attacks against the strong presidency. "In order to preserve the presidency," Buckley said, "Mr. Nixon must resign as President."

Moreover, since no one could accuse Buckley of being animated by partisan considerations or a left-wing outlook, he legitimized the articulation of opposition to the President for a whole spectrum of congressional opinion. In effect, Buckley did in the Congress the exact reverse of the child who pointed out that as far as Mr. Nixon goes there are only clothes — no emperor.

To stave off the forces now gathering against him, Mr. Nixon is going to have to do the one thing he has so far refused to do. He is going to have to address himself in detail and candor to the highly specific charges which have caused even his closest supporters to wonder whether he isn't guilty of such undoubted criminal acts as obstruction of justice.