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The G.O.P. Disengages

Dean Burch, counselor to President Nixon, overreached himself two weeks ago in a speech to the Republican National Committee, a speech that he said he had cleared with the President. Mr. Burch, now the chief political guru on the White House staff, told his fellow Republican leaders that they had to sink or swim with Mr. Nixon because his roles as President and as party leader are "indistinguishable."

"Our hopes and our goals and our fortunes are as one," Mr. Burch declared.

His fellow Republicans heard the Burch plea for loyalty in catatonic silence. A gust of laughter or an angry roar would have been healthier and a good deal more appropriate. It is self-evident now as it has been for many months that Mr. Nixon has engaged in grave misconduct and that for the Republican party to identify with his leadership is a prescription for electoral disaster as well as a moral disgrace.

Yet for months, Republican leaders at every level have clung to the unctuous line that Watergate has nothing to do with the Republican party and that it was all the fault of that disowned and illegitimate entity, the Committee to Re-Elect the President. As recently as a few weeks ago, even Vice President Ford was reworking that threadbare theme at a party conference in Chicago and actually gaining favorable publicity from it.

That line is absurd on its face. Mr. Nixon was the candidate of the Republican party and he and his closest associates controlled the re-election committee. Dozens of leading Republicans spoke under the committee's auspices as "Presidential surrogates." One of Mr. Ford's own sons worked for the committee. After John Mitchell resigned as committee chairman, he was replaced by Clark MacGregor, a former Republican Congressman and Senatorial candidate. Mr. Burch only spoke the simple truth when he said that Mr. Nixon's roles as President and party leader are indistinguishable—unless and until the party disavows him and his leadership.

Very few Republicans have been willing to do that. Senator Weicker of Connecticut has been the earliest and the most forthright. But most state and national party leaders have taken refuge in silence or doubletalk. As one dreadful revelation has followed another, Republican professionals have begun to mutter that each of their candidates should run on his own, tiptoeing around Watergate and tacitly disavowing any connection with Mr. Nixon. But that feeble strategy has already failed in special elections for the House in Pennsylvania, Ohio and Michigan.

Now at last as the edited White House tapes demonstrate the abysmal character of Mr. Nixon's leadership, Republicans in Congress have begun the first tentative moves toward disengaging their fate from his. Senator Scott of Pennsylvania and Representative Rhodes of Arizona, the two Republican floor leaders, have publicly condemned the "deplorable, disgusting, shabby, immoral" performances of all who participated in the taped White House conversations. It is some measure of the party's desperation that these two leaders now feel able to say what they might have said more than seven months ago when Mr. Nixon drove Attorney General Richardson and Deputy Attorney General Ruckelshaus out of office and tried to crush the special prosecutor's investigation.

The hopes, goals and fortunes of the Republican party are not synonymous with those of Mr. Nixon. He wants only to save himself at any cost. He has drawn the wagons in a circle and is making his defiant last stand. But if the Republican party is to survive and flourish as the voice of responsible conservatism in the two-party system, its many other leaders, financial supporters and rank-and-file adherents have to face up much more openly and cleanly to the gravest moral and political crisis either party has confronted in a century.