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Breaking Rank

GOP Defections Hurt Nixon in His Struggle To Hang Onto Office

Revulsion Over Transcripts Brings Resignation Talk By Rhodes, Other Leaders

Ford: It's a 'Sorry Mess'

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WASHINGTON — President Nixon's vital Republican support is collapsing, leaving him in extreme danger of losing his increasingly desperate fight to hang on to office.

Widespread GOP revulsion about the President's handling of the Watergate cover-up, as disclosed in the massive transcripts Mr. Nixon released last week, broke wide open yesterday. It was most starkly demonstrated when House Republican leader John Rhodes told a group of reporters that Mr. Nixon ought to consider resigning because his ability to "operate effectively" as President is becoming threatened by the "erosion" of public respect for him.

Rep. Rhodes, a leader who reflects the Republican Party's bedrock conservatives, carefully qualified his resignation suggestion. He said he wasn't recommending resignation but was merely saying the President should think about it. He said that, in his opinion, the President at this time retains enough public support to "operate effectively" and is only threatened with becoming an ineffective leader.

A Message to the President

Nonetheless, the mere surfacing of the resignation suggestion by Mr. Rhodes was an unmistakable message to President Nixon that the GOP troops in the House are turning strongly against him in the impeachment battle. Rep. Rhodes' remarks about resignation at a breakfast meeting with reporters were followed in rapid-fire order by other prominent Republicans, who either joined in feeding resignation pressure or just spoke scathingly of the President's conduct of his office.

Indeed, some Republicans now are bluntly telling Mr. Nixon that the alternative to his resignation is impeachment by the House and a subsequent trial in the Senate. Thus, one widely respected senior Republican, Rep. Howard Robison of Upstate New York, said that "there has been a rather massive erosion of House Republican support for the President in the last week" as members have absorbed the massive revelations in the transcripts. "It's my judgment now," Rep. Robison added, "that the House will vote to impeach."

Rep. John Anderson of Illinois, the third-ranking House Republican leader, agrees. "If Nixon doesn't resign, the present mood of the House is to impeach."

Mr. Anderson, stating conclusions shared by many congressional Republicans, declared that "the transcripts convict (the President) with his own words of a lack of moral sensitivity." As a result, he said, "I can see many advantages for the country in resignation now that I didn't see a few months ago."

Late yesterday afternoon, Rep. Anderson issued a formal statement in which he all but called for the President's resignation. "I can see no way at the present time whereby the President can recover the confidence of the American people and rehabilitate respect for his office," he said. "In view of this, it would appear to me that the welfare of the nation would be best served if the President considered voluntary resignation."

Senate Speculation

In the Senate, too, there was a sudden surfacing of resignation speculation. Significantly, it came from some longtime Nixon stalwarts, "I'm not nearly as certain as I was a month ago that the President would fight it all the way," GOP Sen. Clifford Hansen of Wyoming said. "The erosion of the support he's had has been significant."

Sen. Hansen said he agrees with GOP Sen. Barry Goldwater, who had speculated in a speech Tuesday night that Mr. Nixon would resign if impeached by the House "rather than put the nation through two or three months of televised horror" of a Senate trial. While Sens. Hansen and Goldwater both stressed that they weren't recommending resignation, others interpreted their remarks as a polite way of telling the President that his position is deteriorating so badly that he may have to quit for the good of the country.

"It's beginning to build," said liberal Sen. Edward Brooke of Massachusetts, who called months ago for the President's resignation and thus became the first prominent Republican to do so. "More people are going to begin to call for resignation who just don't want to go through a trial," he predicted.

"Agonizing Reappraisal"?

There is, of course, no way for Republicans to force the President to resign rather than to go on fighting impeachment. Even Republicans suggesting resignation don't have any expectation that the President will heed their advice at this time. Thus, Rep. Anderson said he expects the impeachment proceedings will continue—and result in the House Judiciary Committee's voting a bill of impeachment—and "maybe then there will be an agonizing reappraisal" by the President concerning resignation.

Yesterday the White House forcefully restated the President's oft-expressed determination to fight. "The President has every intention to complete the work of his administration" and is "determined to stay in office," presidential spokesman Gerald R. Warren said.

Another White House public-relations man, Ken Clawson, declared that Mr. Nixon "will not quit even if hell freezes over."

Mr. Nixon still has weapons at his command if he continues to "tough it out." For one thing, even as some Republicans express a yearning for his resignation, they also say the Watergate transcripts, by themselves, don't provide clear-cut evidence of impeachable offenses. Moreover, there is

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a strong chance that the House Judiciary Committee's impeachment inquiry may bog down. Time could be on Mr. Nixon's side as the emotional reaction subsides to what Senate GOP leader Hugh Scott on Tuesday described as the "deplorable, shabby, disgusting and immoral performance" disclosed by the transcripts.

Yesterday the House committee began hearing evidence on whether Mr. Nixon should be impeached, and some of the tensions that will surely plague and may delay its deliberations became evident.

One point at issue is whether a President can be impeached for an action that isn't a crime. Most of the committee's Democrats say he can, but many GOP members disagree. The ranking Republican, Edward Hutchinson of Michigan, said yesterday the Constitution requires "a finding of criminal culpability on the part of the President of the United States himself."

For the time being, at least, there isn't any question but that Republican politicians believe that Mr. Nixon's remaining public support in his impeachment fight has shrunk drastically. This opinion was evident in remarks that Vice President Gerald Ford delivered yesterday at Eastern Illinois University, in which he implicitly separated himself from President Nixon.

Mr. Ford pointedly declared that "there has been an erosion of confidence in our federal government which I believe has reached crisis proportions." Referring to the "sorry mess" of Watergate, the Vice President continued: "Much remains untested and unproved. But what has taken place up to now has created a diminished confidence in our public officials (and) basic distrust of their motives."

Plainly referring to deletions ordered by the President in the Watergate transcripts, Mr. Ford added this warning that seemed obviously aimed at Mr. Nixon:

"While it may be easy to delete characterization from the printed page, we cannot delete characterization from the people's minds with a wave of the hand. . . I firmly believe that it is time to put more truth in politics—that the time has come for persons

in political life to face the truth and to speak the truth. The time has come for persons in political life to avoid the pragmatic dodge which seeks to obscure the truth."

Mr. Ford continued, "One thing every elected officeholder must do is pay attention to the voter. If he fails to listen, he won't be an office holder very long."

In a later press conference, Mr. Ford added that he doesn't think the President should resign and that he is convinced that Mr. Nixon is "not guilty of an impeachable offense."

Taken together, the Ford-Scott-Rhodes remarks indicate a unified GOP leadership message to the President that he will find little or no Republican support in Congress for his hard-line position against providing further evidence sought by the House Judiciary Committee. This evidence covers such matters as the ITT and milk scandals as well as the Watergate cover-up. One knowledgeable House Republican says: "The message is don't play games but cooperate. If you have any information that will clarify the issues, make it available. The attitude of giving nothing more isn't sustainable."

Plainly, though, GOP congressional leaders now are convinced that the President doesn't have in his possession any further material that would tend to exculpate him from Watergate crimes. And, so now they are testing the chances of persuading the President to quit his office to spare the country and his party what they commonly assess as "devastating" damage.

Melancholy Mood

This is happening even though many Republicans continue to say that the evidence publicly available to date doesn't support proof of what they consider "high crimes and misdemeanors" warranting impeachment and removal from office. Yet at least some of Mr. Nixon's onetime loyalists are in such a melancholy mood that they feel conclusive proof of impeachable offenses will inexorably come to light. Still others are beginning to say that—even lacking proof of impeachable offenses—it may become necessary to impeach Mr. Nixon because he no longer has the "moral authority" they be-

lieve necessary for a President.

Thus, "There is a question whether he can handle the office any more," veteran Republican Rep. Albert Quie of Minnesota said. "I don't see this letting up at all, and there comes a point where confidence in the man is so eroded that it's just impossible for him to govern." Mr. Quie added that "I don't think we've reached that point yet, but we're approaching it."

As a consequence, although there certainly isn't any GOP consensus on a course of action, Rep. Robison observes that Republicans are beginning to openly "search for alternatives to avoid the trauma and paralysis that would go with impeachment and a trial."

Yet Republicans are far from united on whether Mr. Nixon's resignation would be a good idea. "I think a resignation under fire is, in effect, a cop-out," said conservative GOP Rep. Philip Crane of Illinois. Mr. Crane, while declaring that the transcripts show the President's behavior has been "appalling," said that "the Constitutional proprieties should be observed in removing a President from office."

Similarly, moderate Republican Rep. Edwin Forsythe of New Jersey said he is fearful that Mr. Nixon's resignation would leave "clouds over the office of the presidency" that would plague the country in the future. He and others are worried that a Nixon resignation would leave a lasting and divisive bitterness among the President's backers.

However, House GOP leader Rhodes addressed himself to this issue even while carefully maintaining that he wasn't actually calling for the President's resignation. "I'm not at all convinced that going through the whole impeachment process would settle the dust," he said. "I don't see that there's much choice between resignation and impeachment. . . . Either would be a traumatic process."

Editorial Shock Waves

In any case, more and more Republicans are convinced that Mr. Nixon's hard-core support among the public is shrinking rapidly. Mr. Rhodes, who skipped a GOP leadership meeting with the President to breakfast with reporters, said that mail from his conservative Arizona district is running 10 to 1 against the President since the release of the Watergate transcripts. Another Republican said, "Nixon's Middle American bastion is crashing down."

An editorial calling for Mr. Nixon's swift

resignation or impeachment in yesterday's Chicago Tribune, probably the most influential Republican newspaper in the country, had a shock-wave effect on congressional Republicans, who have been largely impervious to cries for Mr. Nixon's ouster by publications they consider liberal. Rep. Rhodes repeatedly cited the Tribune editorial as a major reason for Mr. Nixon to do some "soul-searching" about resignation.

Meantime, some House Republicans are huddling privately to see if it might be possible to put together a delegation that would go to Mr. Nixon and tell him "you have no support left on the Republican side and will take a helluva shellacking on an impeachment vote," as one House Republican puts it.

While it is undoubtedly an exaggeration to say that Mr. Nixon has "no support left" among Republicans, there were almost no congressional Republicans who came publicly to the President's support as his party backing suddenly started crumbling. Indeed, Rep. Barber Conable of Upstate New York, chairman of the House Republican Policy Committee, suggested that the party caucus may meet next week to debate the issue of whether the President should be urged to resign by the party's House members.

In all this, Republicans insist that they aren't motivated by their acknowledged fears that the party's candidates could be wiped out in huge numbers if Mr. Nixon remains in office during the November elections. "I haven't had a single member say to me that this guy (the President) is killing me at home," Rep. Rhodes told reporters.

Still, when asked, the House Republican leader said that GOP candidates "obviously, as of now," would be better off if Vice President Ford succeeded to the presidency before the November elections.