

Business Is Souring On Nixon

By Peter Milius

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HOT SPRINGS, Va., May 10—The nation's big businessmen are souring on the President they helped elect two years ago.

Few of them are saying that Mr. Nixon ought to quit, as some other of his erst while supporters have begun to do.

But neither are most of them still defending the President or saying with conviction that he should stay in office, according to a sampling of opinion among members of the Business Council, which is meeting here.

There is instead among these men who run the nation's largest corporations, a kind of flatness and detachment now from Mr. Nixon and his troubles.

"Once you've lost the country, you've got to go," said the chairman of the finance committee of one of the country's best-known corporations, who, like most of the others interviewed, declined to speak for attribution.

"There has to be a fundamental reversal of public opinion or I don't think he can last," this chairman said. Asked his own view of the President's behavior, and what he ought to do now, the businessman said, about it.

"I'm on the fence, I'm sick

The Business Council is a private organization, made up of the chief executive officers of about 100 of the country's blue-chip corporations. The men interviewed here include the chief executives of such companies as Textron, DuPont, General Motors, Republic Steel, Alcoa, Bank of America and Sears, Roebuck. They supported Mr. Nixon over George McGovern almost to a man in 1972.

A few say they still support him. David Packard, chairman of Hewlett-Packard, chairman of the council, and former deputy secretary of defense in the Nixon administration, said, "I don't think he should go."

The President's "foreign policy accomplishments overbalance these so-called Watergate things," Packard said. "His leaving would cause more problems than it could solve."

But he added quickly, "I don't like it. I don't like the attitudes expressed in those tapes."

A few of the businessmen also say flatly that Mr. Nixon should resign. "He's pulling down the stature of the office," the chairman of one company asserted. "Hell, yes, the country would be better off if he got out."

Most, though, hedged when asked if Mr. Nixon ought to stay or go.

"I've been a long-time supporter of Nixon," one older businessman said quietly. "I know him personally. I worked very hard to get him elected. It's been a very—I don't know how to say it—startling thing to me, what was on those tapes, I'll say that much.

"If the President is right, he ought to stick it out," this man went on. "I'd like to know all the facts; I'm not sure we do. But it may be that the only way to get them is through impeachment proceedings and a trial in the Senate. I don't know."

Several of those interviewed said they would rather see the question settled constitutionally—have the House take up impeachment, then the Senate try the President if necessary—than have him resign. Their fear is for due process; they are alarmed at the idea, as one put it, that a President might be "simply swept out of office."

"History will show you business has done better under Democrats than Republicans anyway," one said. "It's not that. My concern is with our form of government, not him. But I think they should resolve it rapidly."

The council members are not holding the President at arm's length because of the state of the economy. On the contrary the weakness of the economy in the first quarter has left most of them unworried. Their profits are high, they are out from under price controls, and they say they are optimistic about the months ahead.

A group of about 20 economists from their own corporations reported to the council members today that they expect "some improve-

ment" in production in the second half of the year. They added, however, that for the year as a whole they think the real Gross National Product—total output of goods and services in the country—will at best be only equal to last year's, and could turn out slightly below. The administration has predicted it will be slightly above.