

Nixon Woos Conservative Legislators

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White House aides have taken pains to remind members of Congress that they are sitting on the impeachment jury and, therefore, that it is improper for them to discuss the case against President Nixon.

It would seem to be even more improper, however, for Mr. Nixon as the defendant to court members of the jury. Yet he has taken key senators and representatives on dinner cruises down the Potomac. He has made White House planes, limousines and other privileges available to them. He has pampered them with sudden attention.

The President is even tailoring his legislative program, at least in part, to appeal to the conservatives whose votes he is counting upon to keep him in office. The politics of impeachment, rather than the merits of the legislation, now seem to determine what bills he will support.

For example, the President had halted the construction of a cross-Florida barge canal to preserve the beauty of northern Florida's Oklawaha River. As recently as six weeks ago, the White House reassured Florida conservationists of the President's support.

But the promises are forgotten after a contingent of conservative congressmen called upon the White House to go ahead with the barge canal. The President hastily withdrew his opposition.

The same thing happened to a federal land-use bill, which the President had described as his "No. 1 environmental priority" in his State of the Union message last January. Rep. Morris Udall (D-Ariz.) working closely with the Interior Department, drew up a bill to accomplish the President's objective.

But conservatives were afraid the bill would allow the federal government, for the sake of the environment, to infringe on private ownership. House Republican leader John J. Rhodes (R-Ariz.) and Rep. Sam Steiger (R-Ariz.) arranged a private visit with the President and urged him to abandon the Udall bill.

Although the bill simply codified his own proposals, Mr. Nixon accepted the suggestion of the two powerful conservatives. Steiger helpfully provided a weakened substitute bill, which the President quickly endorsed.

This killed the Udall bill. It was a victim, snorted Udall, of "Watergate politics." Agreed a staff member privy to the backstage maneuvering: "This was clearly a case of Nixon trying to shore up his conservative support."

The President has also shifted his stand against other consumer, environmental and social programs, which the conservatives despise. And he has showered them with other White House blessings.

When Sen. John Sparkman (D-Ala.) called from Paris to complain about a second-rate Air

Force plane that had been provided to fly a congressional contingent home from Europe, the White House hastily dispatched Vice President Ford's plane across the Atlantic to pick up the Sparkman group.

Another time, the President gave Sparkman and Sen. James Allen (R-Ala.) a lift home from Alabama and provided them with limousines at the airport. And Vice President Ford gave Sen. Hiram Fong (R-Hawaii) a ride to Hawaii last month.

Few members of Congress used to get in to see the President when the German shepherd dogs, H. R. Haldeman and John Ehrlichman, were guarding the door. Liberals are still excluded except on ceremonial occasions.

For example, Sen. Walter Mondale (D-Minn.) hasn't been inside the White House since the late President Lyndon Johnson occupied the place, and Sen. George McGovern (D-S.D.) couldn't even get an official list of Cabinet members from the White House for an inquiring student.

But the doors have been thrown open to the conservatives, such as Sens. Strom Thurmond (R-S.C.), Robert Dole (R-Kans.), Peter Domenici (R-N.Mex.), James Eastland (D-Miss.), and Walter Huddleston (D-Ky.), whose names are on a list of 34 to 39 hard-core conservatives whose vote the President needs to save himself from removal.

Sens. Wallace Bennett (R-Utah) and Russell Long (D-La.) were invited to a private breakfast ostensibly to discuss trade with the President a couple of weeks ago. Earlier, the President played the piano at a birthday party for Bennett, and Long was granted a 90-minute audience with the President.

Sen. James Buckley, the New York conservative, had dinner at the White House 10 days before he asked Mr. Nixon to resign. He hasn't been invited back.

Sen. Ted Stevens (R-Alaska), admitted to us that his requests "were put on the back burner" in the Haldeman-Ehrlichman days. But this year "things have opened up," he said, and White House aides "are more receptive to my inquiries."

A spokesman for conservative Sen. J. Bennett Johnston (D-La.) put it even more candidly. "The White House is wooing Johnston. Nixon has been doing favors for Southern senators . . . (for) anyone who's a swing vote on impeachment."

Footnote: A White House spokesman denied that the President's environmental shift had anything to do with impeachment politics. The President simply is trying to safeguard the environment and, at the same time, to provide an adequate energy supply, said the spokesman. He claimed that the President accepted the substitute land-use bill "because it was a better bill."

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