

In Holdrege, Neb., Where Weather Tops

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HOLDREGE, Neb.—In 1972 President Nixon tallied more than 82 per cent of the vote in this bustling south-central Nebraska community. That was even better than Leland Swenson did in his bid for position on the Phelps County Weed Control Commission.

Today, however, after all the Watergate disclosures, the transcripts, the income tax difficulties, the court cases and the unresolved

This is the first of several articles exploring the attitudes of President Nixon's supporters in communities around the country.

charges, local residents say they now believe if another election were held this month, President Nixon might do just a bit better here.

Why?

It is not just that they love Mr. Nixon, although many here do. It is not just that they dislike George McGovern, although many here do.

It's a combination of diverse reasons — a strong Republican tradition in the nation's historically most Republican state, too many charges that touch on but do not clearly implicate Mr. Nixon, a fear of the unknown aftermath of impeachment proceedings, a certain feeling that propriety and good taste have been exceeded in attacks on "our President," and an intense dislike for and distrust of the President's Eastern enemies who, it is believed, are applying a double standard in gleeful attempts to settle old political grudges against him.

Belittles Congress

"Out here," said Ralph Misko, the Republican party county chairman, "you don't hear the bitching about Nixon that you do back East. It's Congress that's lost its credibility here."

In fact, by all accounts Watergate and President Nixon are little discussed hereabouts. There is a feeling that if you are for him, there is no need to talk. And if you are against him, they do not want to talk.

Far more important in the conversations along Garfield, Tilden, Elaine and Grant Streets, under the elms in the square and in the Dale Hotel coffee shop are those dark gray clouds that appear after a hot day, possibly bringing hail and instant crop destruction to the 344,320 acres of corn, wheat and grains in Phelps County (named for William Phelps, a Mississippi riverboat captain who never visited here).

There was, however, one very pressing political issue in recent warm days: whether or not to fluoridate the water for Holdrege's 5,635 residents. The nays had it, in large part, many said, because it seemed the state was literally jamming the chemical additive down the people's throats.



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Miss Nellie Johnston, on her porch in Holdrege, Neb., holds petitions supporting President Nixon. "I can't believe there's one dirty thing wrong with Richard Nixon," she said.



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Such pushing does not set well on these rural plains, where independence and stubbornness enabled pioneers like John Crossley and Geneva Goodspeed to settle a seemingly limitless, Indian-infested, irrigated, grasshopper-ridden area known once as the Great American Desert.

Some settlers dribbled down from the Oregon Trail, that popular route a few miles north of here that is now called Interstate 80. Others followed the Pony Express or came with the Burlington Railroad, which arrived in 1883 under the leadership of a New Yorker, George W. Holdrege.

Almost from the start, these settlers voted Republican. The first local voting records were stolen by Swan Miller in a dispute over where the county seat was to be (Holdrege won). But in 1896, existing records show, the Republican party got 7,673 votes, the Socialist Labor party got 1,211, the Prohibition party 172 and the Democrats 117.

There are many fewer

Phelps County residents now, but the political balance is about the same. And when asked about Watergate, President Nixon's supporters here respond with fervor.

"I can't believe there's one dirty thing wrong with Richard Nixon," says Miss Nellie Johnston, who saw television for the first time on the night of Mr. Nixon's 1952 Checkers speech.

"Some people did some awful wrong things at Watergate," she continued, "but you'll never convince me that Nixon knew of them. Now you talk about dishonesty. What about all those votes the Democrats always steal in Chicago? And Presidents Wilson and Johnson talking about their going to keep us out of war?"

"And immorality? What about that Wilson running

around with another woman until his wife died of a broken heart? And L.B.J. took the same tax deductions for his papers. But you don't hear about that much. No, sir."

"If Nixon had been a Democrat," she concluded, "we'd never have heard of any of this."

"I'm just not going to believe the President is wrong until he's convicted," said Harley Lofton. "I don't have that much faith in the news media any more. They keep talking and writing and talking and writing about Watergate."

"Why don't they get off the poor man's back? Why, Nixon shouldn't be thrown out of office any more than Johnson was over Bobby Baker or Kennedy was over the Bay of Pigs."

Watergate as an Issue, Nixon Is Strongly Backed

"And about those tapes," added his wife, Neva, "they're private, for one thing. And if there's nothing wrong on them, then they shouldn't matter to that House committee. And if there is, then why should Nixon have to incriminate himself? What about the Fifth Amendment?"

Both said they sensed a surge of sympathy for Mr. Nixon among their friends, thanks to what they felt was negative news coverage.

"Watergate news has become a real fad," said Mr. Lofton. "If it gouges Nixon, it's news. If it doesn't, it's ignored. That Senator [Edward] Brooke knocks the President and the [Omaha] World-Herald puts it on page one. Our Senator [Carl] Cur-

tis defends him, and it's on page 32."

"You can see the gleam in those TV reporters' eyes when they have bad news," added Mrs. Lofton.

Clark Nobe, a 42-year-old lawyer, says the adverse reporting is so bad it seems like "a reverse McCarthy era."

Unsavory Politics

"The President's enemies have generated so much unfavorable news about him," Mr. Noble says, "some people believe it must be true. Anyway, I can't understand why some people suddenly expect politics to be conducted in a churchlike atmosphere. It never has been before, but they only talk about it now

because they can get at Nixon."

"Those Eastern liberals," said Mrs. Louise Mulliner, an art teacher, "try to make their political beliefs seem so sophisticated just because they're liberal. But they blast and nit-pick so much it sounds like propaganda now."

"The President puts his life on the line," she continued. "Why should he have to pay any taxes? And why weren't all those critics complaining about the President's language back with Truman and Kennedy and Johnson?"

And, since she cannot think of another man "with as much to offer this country," Mrs. Mulliner believes Mr. Nixon should finish out his term.

"I don't want America to become one of those banana countries kicking its President out when he perhaps does something wrong," she says.

"I'll bet those House committee members have just as many skeletons in their closets," said Mrs. Laura Simpson. "These so-called critics never mention the good things Mr. Nixon has done, ending the war, and those college riots. Why it's a disgrace to treat him this way. He's got such a fine family and he's taken all this abuse."

Then she shakes her head and pauses.

"All things come to an end," she said, "and I guess this will, too."