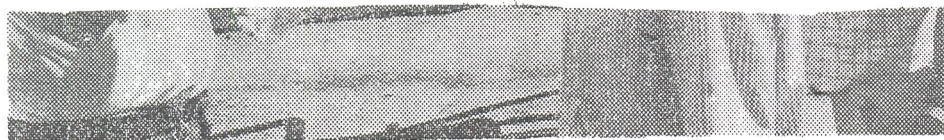


Nixon Pardon Deflates



Representative Robert B. Mathias looking for votes among apple packers in Fresno County. Redistricting and Watergate aftermath are creating problems for him.



Photographs for The New York Times by STEPHANIE MAZE

John J. Krebs, center, chairman of the Fresno County Board of Supervisors, talking to workers at a winery in Fresno County as he campaigned for Mr. Mathias's seat.

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By DOUGLAS E. KNEELAND
Special to The New York Times

FRESNO, Calif.—On Sept. 7, Bob Mathias was happy—or at least as happy as could be expected for a Republican Congressman running for re-election in a new district with a big Democratic edge in voter registration.

He was home for the Labor Day recess, finally getting a chance to do his first intensive campaigning of the year. Richard M. Nixon had resigned the Presidency, sparing Congress

This is the last of several articles assessing the re-election prospects of Republican Congressmen in light of Richard M. Nixon's resignation and President Ford's subsequent pardon.

what could have been for some conservative members such as Robert B. Mathias a politically embarrassing vote either way on impeachment.

Moreover, like Republican candidates everywhere, he was drawing a new sense of well-being from the warmth of the nation's obvious love affair with President Ford.

That was on Sept. 7.

The next day Mr. Ford abruptly pardoned Mr. Nixon for whatever crimes, still unspecified, he may have committed as President.

Just as suddenly, for Mr. Mathias and those other Republicans struggling to hold their seats, the nightmare of Watergate was back.

25-1 Against Pardon

"We're getting a lot of calls and they're running about 25-to-1 against the President," Bob Jennings, the Congressman's executive assistant, said a few days later at the district office in Visalia where Mr. Mathias was listening to the problems of constituents.

"After months of being down, Republicans were just getting their morale back up when, wham, this thing had to hit."

But that day in early September, Bob Mathias was feeling good. Still boyishly handsome, lean, athletic-looking and recognizable at the age of 43 as

the Olympic decathlon champion of 1948 and 1952, he had received a friendly welcome as he did some small-town handshaking.

Ducking out of the 100-degree heat of the San Joaquin Valley into the air-conditioned stores on the main street of Fowler, just south of here, he made small talk with shoppers and employes.

But the amiable reception, the recognition, the lingering hero worship were not the only reasons he had felt good.

"You couldn't win either way, for or against impeachment," he had said. "We would have had to explain and explain why we voted for impeachment and we still would have lost some Republicans."

"Before, all you could talk about was Watergate. You spent all the time explaining how you were going to vote on impeachment. Now it's completely gone."

Ecstatic Over Ford

He had waxed ecstatic about President Ford.

"I think it's fantastic, what he's doing," he had said. "People like his style, his attitude. It's a refreshing change from the Nixon years. I think the attitude he's created helps out everybody. It helps me. It helps Democratic incumbents. People say, 'The President's a good guy now, so politics must be O.K.' It just elevates everybody."

But that was on Sept. 7.

Mr. Mathias has since lost some of his buoyancy.

"I don't know what it's going to do here," he said. "I don't know whether it's 50-50 or not. Some people say he should have been pardoned. Others are real upset about it."

Shaking his head, he went on: "People bring it up and I have to explain why I think Ford did it even though it's a White House problem. He had tremendous popularity, but people just don't like what he did. It brings his popularity down."

Mr. Mathias concedes that at first he had tried to brush off the matter by saying "As a Congressman, I really don't have much to do with it."

Then, realizing that he would have to take a stand, he de-

clared that the pardon was "premature."

"I think politically it was very premature," he said the other day, "and politically it was the wrong thing to do. I think it hurts us. We're back again to talking about a real controversial issue."

Like most Republican incumbents these days, he is less than delighted at the prospect of having his campaign involved in any more White House-provoked controversies.

Special Problems

Besides, he has special problems.

As if things were not bad enough regarding Watergate, runaway inflation and the threat of a recession, a redistricting supervised by the California Supreme Court dismembered his safe 18th District, which included 17 counties strung out over almost 400 miles of the rich farmlands of the San Joaquin Valley.

After being swept into office on a Republican tide in 1966, when Ronald Reagan first captured the governorship, Mr. Mathias easily won re-election three times in his conservative rural district, getting more than 60 per cent of the vote in each race.

Suddenly this year, he found himself in the new compact 17th District, which takes in part of his home county of Tulare, neighboring Kings County and half of the rapidly urbanizing Fresno County, which has a population of 440,000.

As in his old district, the registration is roughly 60 to 40 per cent in favor of the Democrats, but these are not the transplanted Southerners of the 18th, who registered Democratic out of tradition but in recent years tended to vote more and more for Republicans. Instead, many of them are urban Democrats, union members, blacks, Chicanos, white-collar liberals.

And it does not help that he has an opponent he acknowledges to be "a tough guy, a good organizer," John J. Krebs, 47, a short, peppery attorney who is chairman of the Fresno County Board of Supervisors.

An official of the Republican Congressional Campaign Com-

mittee in Washington, even in the era of good feeling before the pardon of Mr. Nixon, listed Mr. Mathias as one of a number of incumbents he considered in serious trouble.

Mr. Krebs exudes optimism, especially since the pardon.

"When I saw the boundaries, 20 minutes after I had the paper in my hand," Mr. Krebs said, "I decided to run, because this was my type of district. He had a safe district, a district in which I'd never have run against him."

Mr. Krebs noted that as a Supervisor he has represented about half the people in the new district for four and a half years. Moreover, he said he

hoped to match the well-known Mr. Mathias in local name recognition because he had appeared on area television about once a week since he had been on the board.

Mr. Krebs, who fled Germany with his parents for Palestine in 1933 and came to the United States in 1946 to attend the University of California at Berkeley, has been campaigning incessantly since early in the year, first to win the primary and then for the general election.

Although he agrees with Mr. Mathias that the economy, particularly inflation, is the subject most on everyone's mind, he believes that the pardon of

Mr. Nixon has revived the Watergate issue.

"There was almost unanimous opposition to the pardon," he said. "I really think it's hurt Ford, and it's more than just a passing thing. I don't think there's any question it's helped me."

"I don't know how long it's going to last, but I'm going to use it to show that [Mr. Mathias] didn't take a stand on the impeachment issue, then when this came out he waited to see which way the wind was blowing and diametrically changed his stand."

Back on Sept 7, that was a problem a happier Bob Mathias did not have.