

Joseph Kraft

The President and the Watergate Polls

Pose a truly complicated question to American public opinion and the unknown god will usually—and quite sensibly—respond with mumbo-jumbo. So it is with Watergate.

The polls offer no clear guide as to the eventual outcome of the scandal. But they do indicate that the issue will probably drag on and on and on.

The main evidence about the importance of Watergate is supplied by polls on the President's culpability. The public as a whole does not swallow the story that Watergate was something done from beginning to end by subordinate officials without Mr. Nixon's knowledge.

According to the Gallup Poll, 71 per cent of the people believe the President had some knowledge of either the cover-up or the break-in itself. Suspicion of the President runs so strong that more than a third of those questioned by Dr. Gallup believe something that is probably not true—namely, that the President knew about the Watergate bugging in advance.

Another sign of the enduring quality of Watergate lies in the recognition factor. Big changes in opinion almost always flow from the dawning of con-

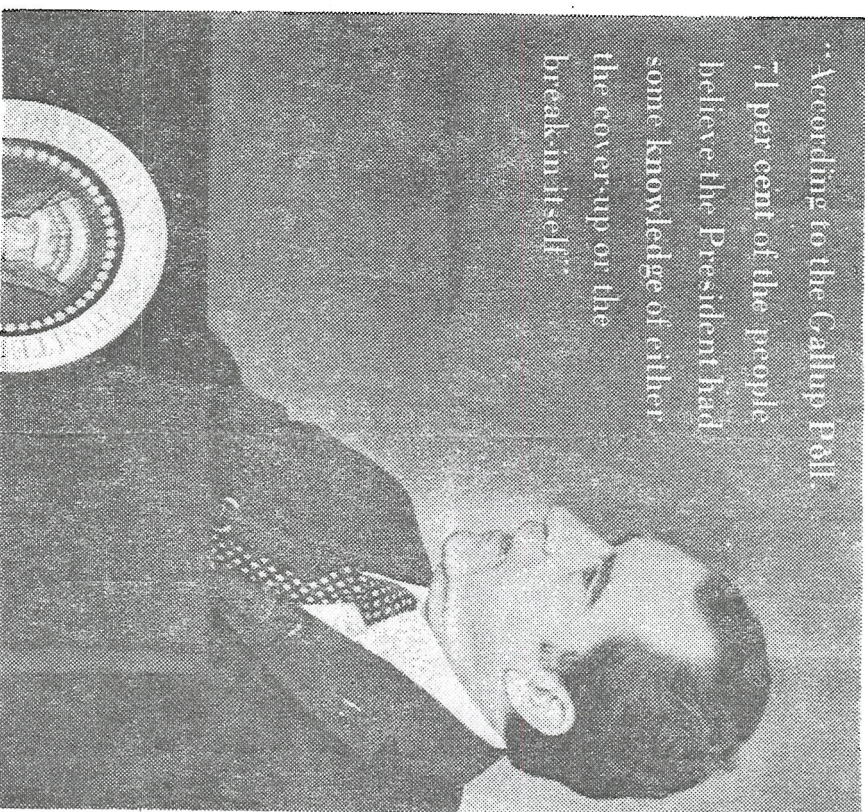
ceedings. More than a third were against impeachment and 14 per cent were undecided.

The Gallup Poll finds a similar sentiment. The same poll which discovered that 71 per cent of the sample believed the President knew about either the break-in or the cover-up, showed that only 18 per cent believed he should be forced out as President.

A similar non-result shows up in the various rematches of Mr. Nixon against the leading candidates of 1972. The poll done for CBS found Nixon with 43 per cent, way ahead of McGovern with 30 per cent, and the rest of the sample undecided or refusing to vote. Sen. Edmund Muskie polled 35 per cent against 41 per cent for the President.

What all this says to me is that the national jury is hanging back from ultimate judgment. There seems to be little positive support for President Nixon and it is hard to spot a way for him to make a comeback. If he resigned, there might well be an enormous sigh of relief. But when it comes to pushing him out, public opinion, in the fullness of its wisdom, is leaving the issue up to the country's elected representatives.

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By Doug Chetler—The Washington Post

sciousness. George McGovern could go from 2 per cent in the polls to about 40 per cent in a matter of 18 months just because people got to know his name.

But Watergate has already saturated public consciousness. The latest Gallup Poll shows that 98 per cent of the public is aware of the scandal. Thus the biggest field for shifts of opinion has been closed off.

Television ratings reinforce the point. Sam Ervin and John Mitchell may not be as funny as Rowan and Martin, but they attract a huge audience. Indeed, the ratings show that the Watergate telecasts are drawing more viewers than required to sustain daytime programs on a commercial basis.

In keeping with this interest, the President's personal popularity has fallen way off. According to the Gallup Poll, his approval rating is at an all-time low. Several polls show him running far worse against George McGovern than he did in the election last fall.

But while taking distances from Mr. Nixon, the country is not moving clearly in any other direction. In particular, there is resistance to the idea of impeachment.

Perhaps the best indication of that resistance is a poll conducted by the Opinion Research Corp. of Princeton, N.J., for CBS. One of the questions loaded the dice heavily against the President. The question rested on the presumption of proof that Mr. Nixon knew in advance about both the Watergate break-in and the subsequent cover-up. It asked if, in that hypothetical case, the respondent would favor impeachment proceedings. It distinguished clearly between the proceedings themselves, which are an indictment, and the forcing out of the President.

Even in those extremely compromising circumstances, there was considerable hesitation. Only 50 per cent of the sample favored impeachment pro-