

WXPost
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JAN 14 1974

Bad News for Mr. Nixon?

Two factors will all but certainly decide the President's future: the mood the members of Congress are finding back home, and thus the mood in which Congress goes back to work; and, far less important but not to be forgotten, the sentiment for and against impeachment shown in the next reports of the leading poll-takers.

At this juncture, it is therefore necessary to be tentative. Yet it already seems rather clear that Richard M. Nixon ought to be warned to get ready for bad news. Consider, for example, the Arkansas district of the powerful chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee, Rep. Wilbur Mills.

Chairman Mills is famous in the House as a man able to judge the feelings of his constituents with almost magical accuracy. His constituents are also far more conservative than the American average.

In 1968, they split three ways, giving the largest vote to Gov. George C. Wallace, the next largest to the President and the smallest slice to then Vice President Hubert Humphrey. In 1972 they gave the President 100,761 votes, against 56,514 for Sen. George McGovern.

They are also Southerners and every Southern Democrat is brought up to hold presidential impeachments in holy horror. This is because the attempted impeachment of President Andrew Johnson was regarded as a direct, viciously partisan assault on the people of the South.

Yet with such a district, which he knows so well, Chairman Mills has reportedly been telling friends that half his constituents now want the President to be impeached. Apparently what turned the district around decisively was not the long series of stories growing out of the Watergate business. The pro-impeachment 50 per cent of Rep. Mills' constituents were mainly enraged by the President's low income tax payments.

If this is a general finding, moreover, it will surely have some effect on the scrutiny of the President's record as a taxpayer by the Joint Committee on Internal Revenue Taxation. The President spent an hour on the telephone persuading Chairman Mills, a leading member of the Joint Committee, to undertake this scrutiny that lies ahead.

The reason this particular committee was preferred by the President was its conservative composition, as contrasted, for instance, with the House Judiciary Committee. In consequence the chairman of the Judiciary Committee, Rep. Peter Rodino of New Jersey, is more than a bit miffed that the President's tax payments have been removed from his jurisdiction.

Yet as of today, Chairman Mills is also known to be convinced that the Joint Committee's scrutiny of the tax matter will have to be exceedingly laborious and detailed. He is therefore predicting no report by the Joint Committee before the end of April. That does not sound like the rapid action by a relatively friendly committee that the President undoubtedly hoped for in the first instance.

Furthermore, if other members of the House have found much anger back home concerning the presidential tax matter, an unfavorable report by

the Joint Committee will have the effect of a hammer blow.

Among congressional Republicans, again, the White House must certainly expect less strong support. How much less strong will be determined when the House and Senate reconvene and the Republican members can exchange the news they have gathered at the grassroots. But already, it is clear that many Republicans will wish to put a certain distance between themselves and Richard M. Nixon, by casting anti-White House votes on selected issues.

For the President, then, the political outlook now seems to be measurably more bleak than it appeared at the end of the last congressional session. He has two things going for him, however, that can possibly change the outlook importantly. On the one hand, almost

all senators and representatives queried thus far have found strong sentiment at the grassroots that there are more important things to do than to impeach the President.

The energy crisis and its consequences have particularly stirred the voters. The Congress proved impotent to pass a sensible or effective energy bill at the last session. If the coming session turns in an equally sorry record on this matter of prime concern to all, the President should benefit—for the Congress, after all, is the stronghold of his political enemies.

In addition a vote on the President's impeachment, whether for or against, will be the most dangerous single vote every senator and representative has ever cast. That will not make for haste.

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