

Sen. Dominick Tries To Ally With Nixon But Duck Watergate

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Some Others in GOP Facing Reelection Also Attempt To 'Separate Out' Issue

By ARLEN J. LARGE

Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL
LITTLETON, Colo. — The Arapahoe
County Bar Association was wallowing in
Watergate.

"As attorneys, we are particularly sensitive to the presumption of innocence on the part of President Nixon," said Harvey Wallace, a Littleton lawyer. "Yet some of us who are defense lawyers, after we hear President Nixon's statements and determine the posture of his defense, can only conclude that his actions are more consistent with criminal culpability than with innocence."

He asked a visitor to comment on that. The visitor, Republican Sen. Peter Dominick, knew exactly what to say. "If impeachment should be voted out by the House, I'd have to sit as a juror, so I shouldn't express any personal opinions on this either way," he said, adopting a popular no-comment formula being used by a lot of Senators these days.

But Sen. Dominick went on to say something more: "I have a fundamental belief that his policies as President have been perfectly magnificent. I don't think this mish-mash known as Watergate ought to hang over what he has done as a leader in this country."

And that's the way the lanky, laconic Mr. Dominick is playing it just now in his effort to get elected in November to a third term. If the House impeaches him, Nixon the person will be judged on the evidence. But Nixon the policymaker is right up Sen. Dominick's alley.

"What we've got to do is keep in mind the relative value of what the President has done by virtue of policy and separate this out from the Watergate situation," he told a group of Republican women recently.

The "Separate-Out" Strategy

Perhaps a half-dozen other GOP Senators facing the voters this fall are in similar circumstances. In varying ways, they are trying to "separate out" Watergate from the conservative doctrines that they have long professed. Mr. Nixon boosts revenue sharing, and so does Sen. Dominick. The President pushes a higher defense budget, as does Sen. Dominick. But when Mr. Nixon gets in a Watergate mess, Sen. Dominick doesn't. That's separate—or so he hopes everyone thinks.

When asked, for example, the Senator says that "the tone of those Watergate transcripts isn't good at all." But he refuses to join some other Republicans in demanding the President's resignation.

If Republican candidates let Mr. Nixon's Watergate problem become the top issue in their own races, Vice President Gerald Ford warns in party pep talks, "we'll lose elections from coast to coast." Mr. Ford urges Republicans to emphasize traditional precinct vote-hustling techniques and to attack the failings of the Democratic Congress.

And indeed, at this point, both Republicans and Democrats in Colorado are behaving rather like their traditional selves in this strange political year. Mr. Dominick wants to run on issues that helped him get elected in the past, with orthodox Republican attacks on big-spending Democrats and the domineering ways of bureaucratic Washington. And, as elsewhere, cosmic matters tend to be heavily mixed with provincialism, with Coloradans wanting to hear their politicians talk about handling oil-shale development and the environment-marring influx of new residents.

Traditional Democratic Attack

Six Democrats want the nomination to run against Sen. Dominick in the fall. Their attacks this early haven't assumed a hard pattern yet, but Watergate so far isn't washing away the traditional ways of berating Republicans. Mr. Dominick is being assailed more as a tool of big business than a henchman of a wicked President.

"I'm not tying him to Nixon except indirectly," says Martin Miller, a lawyer, who is regarded as one of the major contenders for the Democratic nomination. "Campaigning against Nixon in this state isn't enough. I'm campaigning against Peter Dominick and the 400 largest corporations in America. Dominick represents their interests."

Gary Hart, another Democratic candidate, says he is trying to portray the general "mess in Washington" as more of a liability for Sen. Dominick than is the President alone. "I think Dominick is in a tough spot any way he goes," says the 36-year-old Mr. Hart, a Denver lawyer who was a top adviser to Sen. George McGovern in the 1972 presidential race. "Most people see him as a supporter of the President, but if he tries to disassociate himself from Nixon, the more political he looks, and that's the wrong way to look in a year like this."

As Democratic state chairman, Monte Pasco must stay out of the intraparty rivalry of the six Senate candidates, but he also refrains from exotic new forms of attack on Colorado Republicans just because
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of the President's problems. "A major part of Dominick's vulnerability is a kind of arrogance," he says. Also, he thinks that the GOP in Colorado has fallen into more conservative hands at a time when the state's newcomer-packed electorate is less attracted to traditional Republicanism. "This leaves a gap that the Democrats can move into," he says.

Politics as Usual

The point is not so much whether Mr. Pasco is right or whether Sen. Dominick is indeed vulnerable but that this is the way politicians usually sound. And Sen. Dominick is doing what an incumbent seeking reelection usually does, commuting from Washington every weekend to fly himself around the state's mountains and plains to speak to any group that is available. GOP Sen. Gordon Allott got knocked off in 1972, in part because of inattentiveness to Colorado, and Sen. Dominick wants to escape that fate.

At times Mr. Dominick has seemed to strike an attitude of independence from the administration. He grumped about the refusal of Mr. Nixon's reelection apparatus to help Sen. Allott and other GOP congressional candidates in 1972. He complained loudly last year about a lack of consultation on terms of an administration education bill that he was supposed to fight for. And he drew considerable attention with a toughly worded speech in November that called on Republicans to take no responsibility for White House misdeeds.

That's over. The emphasis now is on "separating out" Watergate to shield those Nixonian policy positions that Sen. Dominick supports. "I think he's been one hell of a good President" except for Watergate, Mr. Dominick says. He thinks that it was a mistake for Mr. Nixon to impose wage-price controls in 1971 but contends that the Democrats forced it down his throat "against his

desires."

"If he were not President, we probably would not be at peace in Vietnam," Mr. Dominick says in almost every speech. "Your neighbors and your own sons and in some cases your own husbands would be subject to the draft. You would not have a peace in the Middle East. You would not have revenue sharing, which has brought in more money to the local areas to spend as they think best."

Beyond this standard Republican gospel, Mr. Dominick attacks busing, a hot topic in the Denver area right now, ridicules Eastern (but not Western) environmentalists and makes personal slams against Sen. Edward Kennedy. Republicans, whose support he wants to solidify at this early point in the election season, lap it up.

Uncertainties Ahead

But clinging to the rock of Republican orthodoxy at this stage offers little protection from the wild uncertainties ahead. Because of unusually complex Colorado nominating procedures, Mr. Dominick can't even tell who his Democratic opponent will be in November.

Besides Mr. Miller and Mr. Hart, the field includes Herrick Roth, former state AFL-CIO president, and Joseph Dolan, once an aide to the late Sen. Robert Kennedy. They must compete in a series of caucuses and conventions to win a place on a Sept. 10 primary ballot, an elimination contest that won't be finished until late July. Sen. Dominick also faces the possible vote-draining presence on the November ballot of "Colorado independent" John King, a former Nixon supporter, who now wants the President to resign.

But the murkiest question of all is whether the Senate will be forced to vote for or against the President's ouster before the November elections. That would ruin all the little stratagems of campaigning Republican Senators designed to "separate out" Watergate from their own voting records. "It's a no-win situation," Sen. Dominick says. "If you vote to convict him, you'll make some people so mad they won't even talk to your dog. If you vote not guilty, you'll get it from the other side."

With all the imponderables, it isn't possible to tell whether traditional political points on the scoreboard will continue to determine this year's winners and losers. If

they do, Sen. Dominick could be returned to Washington for six more years provided that he is perceived as a canny spokesman for free markets and local decision-making, or he could be sunk as an arrogant politician fronting for big business. But for Republicans, there is the alternative possibility that the Nixon Watergate connection will start looming bigger than anything else.

One of the Arapahoe County lawyers wondered whether the Democratic victories in this spring's special House elections portend bad news for Republicans this fall. Mr. Dominick conceded that there was a drop-off in the GOP turnout. "I would be fooling myself and all of you if I didn't say I think this is going to have an adverse effect in November," he said. "Hopefully it won't, but theoretically I think it will, as far as my chances of reelection are concerned."

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