

Nixon, like McGovern, misreading the public?

WASHINGTON — Sen. George McGovern based his disastrous presidential campaign on the assumption that the American people were ready for radical reform, and now President Nixon seems to be interpreting his spectacular victory as a mandate for dramatic conservative reform.

It could be that Nixon is making the same mistake in the opposite direction, for the reaction to his stream of budget cuts and program amendments is now flooding into Washington, and while it shows some support for modest changes, it definitely suggests that the President, like McGovern, may have gone too far.

Howls of protest

To judge primarily by the letters coming into Capitol Hill, the President's antibusing, anti-welfare, and antibig-government pronouncements have been popular, but his specific proposals for cutting federal aid to housing, health, education, libraries, manpower training, and other employment projects, and his latest suggestion that Congress gradually eliminate federal farm subsidy payments, are raising howls of protest.

This reaction came slowly at first for a variety of reasons. First, the President did not set out to dismantle all the social programs of the Roosevelt and post-Roosevelt periods, as some of the protesting Democrats suggest. He was selective in his cuts, and took aim at several political boondoggles most objective observers felt should have been eliminated long ago. Also, he suggested larger appropriations for some social programs, aid to the aged, for example.

Storms began to descend

Second, he fired so many programs at the Congress in a few short weeks that neither the Congress nor the press had time to analyze one program before he hit them with one or two more. But gradually, as the President's first few cuts accumulated into a program of substantial conservative reform, affecting the economic interests of one powerful group after another, the storms began to descend on the Congress from all over the country, and the protest leaders are now organizing a massive rally against his reform in Washington within a few days.

Also, the President's budget cuts coincided with steeply rising food prices and the devaluation of the dollar, which will add to the cost of imported oil, steel, and many other products. The wholesale price index rose 1.6 per cent in December and 1.1 per cent in January, and the agricultural sector of the index was up 5.2 per cent in December and 2.9 per cent seasonally adjusted, in January.

Little complaint

There was little complaint from big business about any of this, for total business sales rose by \$1 billion in December and total business inventories were up by \$1.3 billion over the same period. Nevertheless, a lot of people who had joined Nixon's new majority in the last election, were hurt by the price rises and worries about the potential effects of his proposed cuts, and by mid-February they were beginning to be heard not only in the Congress but in the White House.

The administration is doing its best to transform the support it got from labor in the last election into a permanent Republican gain in future elections, but when Secre-

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tary of the Treasury George Shultz went down to Florida the other day to confer with the labor union leaders in convention, he was told not to expect much labor support for the administration's cuts in the social programs.

A vote in Minnesota

Minnesota, which was among the 49 states that voted for Nixon in November, recently voted \$691 million in state funds to assure equality of education in all communities in that state, but it did so on the assumption that federal aid to education would remain about as it did in the last budget. Now it is faced with the prospect of adding new state and local taxes if it cannot get the federal education budget cuts restored.

The state of Washington, like other states, is being warned about an impending fuel crisis in the nation, but at the same time the President has indicated that funds for their great dam and electric power system in that state are going to be cut.

Local and state taxes up?

"People in our state," said Sen. Henry Jackson of Washington, "may like to hear the President say that he's against raising federal taxes, but they're not so impressed if local and state taxes have to go up to provide the services they need. They are worried about local taxes and the price of food, and when prices go up for imported gas and oil and other things because of the devaluation of the dollar, they're going to be even madder than they are now."

"I think the President may have misread the election returns and is now misjudging the mood of the country," a Republican senator who supported him in November remarked. "The people may be for some change, but they're not for Nixon's extreme changes anymore than they were for McGovern's extreme changes. I don't think they voted for dramatic reforms. They didn't particularly like Nixon but they couldn't vote for McGovern. That's about all there was to it."

Nixon's negotiating position?

It may be, of course that the administration's budget is merely Nixon's negotiating position. In his exercise of power, he likes to confront his opponents with stern alternatives: bombing or peace in Vietnam; limit expenditures or I'll impound the funds above my limit; reform wasteful or outmoded programs, or I'll veto them if passed.

This makes good headlines and gives the Republican conservatives a clear rallying cry, but it also helps reunite the divided Democrats and mobilizes powerful constituencies that supported the Democrats in the past. It would be ironic if Nixon repeated McGovern's mistake of trying to go too far too fast, but this may very well be what's happening.