



Nixon's Battle With Congress

Joseph Kraft

COLONEL SANDERS never licked his fingers with more gusto than the Nixon Administration showed when it entered its present battle against the Democratic Congress. The President rightly figured the public was solidly behind his crusade against big spending and centralized bureaucracy.

Democratic liberals seemed certain to go down as they defended the programs of the Great Society and the New Frontier. It was a collision, as Pat Buchanan of the White House staff wrote with zest, between "Congress and President, the nation's regnant ideology on the one hand and the nation's political majority on the other." Only it hasn't happened that way at all. Ted Kennedy and Fritz Mondale and the other Democratic liberals have been relatively quiet about social programs. Instead, the backwoodsmen of the Democratic Party have come forward with issues that outflank the Administration on the right.

★ ★ ★

SENATOR SAM ERVIN of North Carolina, the constitutional fundamentalist and supreme foe of civil rights in the last decade, has emerged as the star of the Senate. He is chairman of the committee investigating the Watergate Affair, and he is hammering home his inquiry in a way that truly threatens the administration.

Major questions have been raised about former Attorney General John Mitchell, former Secretary of Commerce Maurice Stans and the President's former Appointments Secretary, Dwight Chapin. Mr. Nixon has felt obliged to claim executive privilege to prevent the former White

House aide from testifying before Congress.

But that claim is almost certainly not going to avail with Senator Ervin. The Senator is sure to press the issue to the point of showing that the President himself has been abusing the Constitution.

A second star to emerge is Senator Robert Byrd of West Virginia, the Majority Whip who has been known as a law-and-order man of such harshness that he took exception to the tributes paid to Martin Luther King at the time of the assassination. Senator Byrd has come forward as the leader of the opposition to Mr. Nixon's appointment of L. Patrick Gray as new director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

Senator Byrd has shaped a strategy which hits Gray as a political appointment rather than a man with a background in law enforcement. In the course of the hearings he has shown that Gray was very solicitous of the White House in the Watergate investigation. And now it appears the confirmation of Gray is in doubt.

★ ★ ★

NONE OF THIS, to be sure, is very elevated or enlightening. Political maneuvering is chiefly involved. But the lesson of what has happened is important.

The fact is that compromise remains the genius of American politics. If the President is prepared to compromise, he will find an accommodating spirit on the Democratic side. But when Mr. Nixon plays confrontation politics, then he gets in return the hard lumps he is now receiving.