

1/16/73
W Post

Voters Increasingly Aware of Issue

Watergate Erodes Confidence in Nixon

Second of two articles

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Last fall, in suburban Ohio and Michigan precincts visited by Washington Post reporters, voters didn't know or particularly care about the bugging of the Democratic headquarters at the Watergate.

To them, as to voters around the country, the presidential election—issue was Richard Nixon vs. George McGovern. Their resounding verdict was for the incumbent President.

Today, in these same precincts, the voters both know and care about the Water-

gate—and especially about the manner in which the man they elected to a second term is addressing himself to the scandal that has hit his party and his administration.

Of 100 persons we interviewed over a four-day period in six selected areas in suburban Cleveland-Akron and Detroit, 88 said they were following the Watergate case. There are still those, like one young woman who when asked what she thought of "Watergate," replied: "Oh, yes, he embezzled some money, didn't he? Well, if he's guilty, he ought to be hung." But we encountered hardly anyone else who by

now does not know what the word Watergate represents.

That knowledge, they say, comes largely from television news, but also from recent front-page treatment in their local newspapers. The coverage seems to have had a cumulative effect absent last fall.

The Senate hearings on the nomination of L. Patrick Gray III to be director of the FBI, and the statements of convicted conspirator James W. McCord Jr., have put Watergate back into their consciousness, with greater force than before. Most voters know few of the names involved. But their curiosity and concern have been whetted.

The voters still seem reluctant to lay the blame directly at Mr. Nixon's doorstep. He is, after all, the President. Mrs. Elizabeth Dragon, a grandmother who voted against him in November, said: "Although I dislike him, I don't think he'd stoop to that."

But about four of 10 persons interviewed said the Watergate case affects how they feel about the President—and about half of the others who said it didn't were quick to add they never cared for him to start. "It's just made it a little worse," said retired Navy man Sylvester Zbitniewski

See POLL, A18, Col. 1

POLL, From A1

of Parma, Ohio. "He was Tricky Dick. Now he's trying to become King Richard."

Wherever the blame for Watergate lies, the most clear-cut and emphatic indictment to come out of our sampling is the near-unanimous view—of nearly seven out of every eight voters—that Mr. Nixon is covering up, that he and his White House aides are mishandling the matter badly. Whether they voted for or against him last fall, that's how they feel.

This is not to say that the voters we talked to are ready to reject the President if they had a second chance. As we reported yesterday, confronted again with a Nixon-McGovern choice, most say they would vote for Mr. Nixon.

Others say whether they would back him again would depend on who the Democrats ran against him—and most add there is no Democrat they favor in sight. The only person mentioned with any frequency was Sen. Edward M. Kennedy (D-Mass.), and as many say they would not vote for him in preference to Mr. Nixon as say they would.

Still, our conversations with voters indicate a serious potential in the Watergate case for eroding the President's political leverage.

On Collision Course

Negative feelings about Watergate could affect Congress, which is already on a collision course with the President on a range of issues from impoundment of appropriated funds to his use of executive privilege against congressional inquiry.

The issue could damage his party in the 1974 congressional elections, and could damage the man who will head the Republican national ticket in 1976.

For all these reasons, what the American people are saying today about Watergate is full of political implications.

A few voters continue to believe, as many did last fall, that the Watergate case is a minor matter, exaggerated by the press, or that further investigation can only be destructive.

"If something comes out, it can only hurt the country," Jack Dinkins, a Nixon Republican in Royal Oak, Mich., said as he raked leaves last weekend. "It can't help it. They might as well drop it. What good does it do? It's been blown terrifically out of proportion."

Doubts Growing

But that view, which surfaced in our public-opinion surveys during the election last fall, is distinctly a minority one in this sampling. People now are concerned. They use such words to de-

scribe Watergate as "pretty underhanded," "a cover-up," "dirty." They say at the least it has affected the dignity of the Presidency, and that Mr. Nixon isn't helping that dignity by his own handling of the matter.

While not yet ready in great numbers to say the President was directly involved, their doubts are growing as he remains personally aloof and keeps his aides silent—tactics that most are aware of and disapprove.

Three out of four questioned now say they believe someone in the White

House, if not Mr. Nixon himself, is responsible. And while he perhaps is not directly to blame, most say, he must ultimately bear the responsibility for whatever eventually emerges.

Here, for instance, is a solid Nixon supporter, a housewife in Parma who had voted for him three times for President. She is now, in her own words, "totally disenchanted with the government." She thinks the Watergate case symbolizes the greatest problem in the country today—the lack of trust in our highest leaders.

"I've become disillusioned and extremely cynical these past months," she said. "I guess I understand better now how the young people have felt about the govern-

ment. When they're even using the sacrosanct FBI for their purposes, wow! It's getting pretty bad when you can't trust the President.

"I'm sure this will hurt the Republican Party. They're going to have to let people come out and testify. Apparently they're trying to hide something. They're handling it very poorly. He's (Nixon) just going to have to let them go to the Congress and testify and let the chips fall where they may."

'A Major Scandal'

Another Nixon supporter in Parma, Alex Janson, was preparing to go on his 3 to 11:30 p.m. factory shift when he was interviewed. Yes, he had voted for Mr. Nixon in 1968 and again last fall, "I'm sorry to say," he remarked. He was upset about rising prices and the President's handling of the economy, but his major concern was with the Watergate episode.

"What's happened since the election is getting to be the proportions of a major scandal," he said. "I'm disappointed, really disappointed. It certainly makes me think seriously about changing the way I would vote now. This here abuse of executive privilege has gotten to the point where the judicial people have no way of questioning the President himself."

"Now that he's given his power of exemption to his underlings, you kind of question what's going on. We just can't have something like that in our country. Our country is based on the system of check and double check, but there's no check when the President has the power to act this way."

In Janson's opinion, Richard Nixon "is just lucky he isn't running again. You know, I think this landslide victory because of the very radical approach of McGovern is what's got to him. He was doing a fair job before, but God, what he's done since..."

Law and Order Issue

There was the policeman's wife in Royal Oak who also had voted for the President in November and who now is reassessing her feelings. She and her husband had been Wallace voters in 1968 who supported Mr. Nixon in 1972 because they believed he was strongly for law and order. Now they, too, are disillusioned.

"The biggest problem in the country today is that we don't carry out our own laws," she said. "One of the problems right now is right there is the Justice Department. My husband's a policeman and he's sick about what's happening. If we can't trust the government

to be honest and above-board, we can't expect anybody else to be honest.

"If these people did what they are saying they should come out and say so. If they didn't, they should come out and say it. There should be a definite yes or no. The Watergate has made me think the government is no longer for the people. The government seems to have decided they will think for us."

Invariably, the Watergate case is associated in people's minds with a broader feeling of distrust for the government. At Akron University, three male students were sitting around a table at lunch hour in the student union discussing Watergate and their views of politicians. All of them had voted for Mr. Nixon last fall; all said Watergate has affected the way they think about the President now; all expressed strong disapproval. But the principal damage to them is not the Watergate as an isolated case. It is how Watergate has made them feel about political leaders that is the most serious part of the equation.

"I feel that politics is dirty," one of them said. "I feel that everyone who has ever made it had to stoop a little to get there. In recent years, anyhow."

'It Hurts Me'

A second student picked up the thought.

"All down the line I figure this way," he said. "This is pretty pessimistic but I don't think you can make it to the top without doing wrong. It hurts me to think President Nixon was this way, but deep down inside I knew this was going on."

And a third joined in to say:

"Nixon is a politician. He would do, and will do, anything to get what he wants. Being younger I thought the President was God—and I don't feel that way now. It's just blown my ideals in these last three months."

Each of those students said they doubted they could vote for Mr. Nixon again if they had the chance.

Then there is Kermit Bensing, a 40-year-old industrial salesman, a Republican who voted for Mr. Nixon the last two times out, who says the country is better off under Mr. Nixon, and who thinks he did a good job getting U.S. troops out of Vietnam.

"I didn't figure he'd get us out with this much dignity and pride," Bensing says, sitting in his small, tidy living room in Stow, an Akron, Ohio, suburb. His two teenage boys listen to his every word with an attentiveness from which he obviously takes pride.

But on Watergate, Bensing says:

"I guess you can't help hearing about it. My feelings at the time were, 'Big deal. That's the way it is in politics.' I guess I still feel that way. However, I suppose I'm getting curious how far this thing went up the ladder. Whether Nixon was behind all this. Not directly, but indirectly."

Irate About Case

"I think he probably told his head honcho, 'Look, do

whatever is necessary but don't tell me about it. So if it ever comes out I can truthfully say I don't know about it.' All I can think of is that Nixon is struggling to save his image. If he's worried after the fact, he must have something to protect."

A couple in their late fifties, were sitting in their living room last weekend talking about the case and Mr. Nixon's handling of it as their two teenage daughters played with a rambunctious dog. They are Democrats who voted for Mr. Nixon — part of the great switchover that built his landslide and that he hopes to convert into his New Republican Majority. She was irate about Watergate; he was cynical — at first.

"I think a lot of higher-ups are going to get involved," she said. "I think the President should do something about it. He keeps saying he doesn't know anything about it. He's been very hush-hush. I think he should be getting on the ball and getting some heads rolling."

Her husband tried to placate her. "That's politics, mother," he said several times as she talked. But as she went on, he began to join in, and finally said:

out, was a concern and a conviction sounded over and over in all the precincts we surveyed.

Small, Tidy Houses

The Middle America we visited, the Nixon Country of 1972 in suburban Ohio and Michigan, is largely the Middle America of small, tidy, one-family houses, with chainlink fences that guard close-cropped backyards and keep large dogs away from strange doorbell-ringers.

Most of the residents are young to middleaged, with small children and small, long-term mortgages, a high school diploma and maybe a year or two of college. It is a Middle America where the people look to the future, with most of their adult years hopefully ahead of them.

Yet in our survey it happened that one elderly couple, Daniel E. Gower, who will be 79 on Tuesday, and his wife, Gladys, who is 77 were the most articulate on the issues posed to them about the present and the future of the United States in the first three months of the second Nixon administration.

Seated in the comfortable, book-cluttered living room of their two-story brick home on Garden Avenue in Royal Oak, Mich., on Detroit's outskirts, they talked for more than an hour about how they had voted for President Nixon in November, and why they probably wouldn't do it again.

'An Opportunist'

Gower is a Republican, a retired plant quarantine in-

spector for the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and his wife is an independent, a retired English and history teacher and former principal of the Sandusky, Mich., high school. They spoke in a spirit of good will, and more out of disappointment than anger, giving the President his due on ending U.S. involvement in Vietnam, but deploring his domestic decisions and, above all else, his failure to act decisively on Watergate.

"I think it was very wrong," Mrs. Gower said of the Watergate incident. "It should be followed up. Sure, the Democrats are pushing it, but that's the reason we have two parties. They're supposed to watch the opposition."

"I don't know if he was involved, but I feel more and more he's a politician rather than a statesman—an opportunist. It was very statesman-like that he made friends with China and the Soviet, but I think he's an opportunist."

'Keeps His Silence'

"I think the President should tell everyone to come clean," her husband said. "He keeps his silence and raises suspicion he knew something about it. He's not trying to clear the case up. If he isn't responsible, he's protecting those who were."

"I'd like to see him tell all he knows. If he is actively involved, he should possible be impeached. I don't know if that would be good for the country."

"I don't know whether he shouldn't be impeached anyway," Mrs. Gower broke in,

"if he's going to oppose Congress on everything. They are the representatives of the people too. Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely."

The Gowers' suggestion that the nation might have to consider the impeachment of President Nixon, it must be stressed, is an extreme and infrequently heard one. In the 100 interviews we conducted, it was mentioned only three times.

What most of our voters expressed, rather, was perplexity—and disappointment—over the President's attitude toward the Watergate case. These Middle Americans who helped re-elect Richard Nixon last November are not asking for his political scalp; what they want from him now is candor, and action, to clear the air. They are telling him, in effect, that they expected more of him as their President.

"Well, there should be an investigation if any hanky-panky should be found. If that could be hushed up by the President of the United States, anything could be hushed up by the party in power."

That the truth should out, and that the President was not doing enough to get it