

Watergate Impact on Nixon

By Rowland Evans and Robert Novak

NEW YORK CITY — Even here in Queens, the Republican heartland of Richard M. Nixon's fervid political supporters, the Watergate scandal is perceptibly beginning to corrode his prestige and popularity, but not nearly so much as it is damaging his administration and his party.

Indeed, were all the bristling suspicions surrounding the Watergate and attendant political scandals suddenly explained, the President's personal standing with the voters would probably emerge not badly scarred — assuming, of course his own innocence was clearly established.

BUT THE LONGER the suspicions continue to poison the political air around the White House, as they do today, the more Mr. Nixon himself — not just his administration and his party — is endangered.

These are unavoidable conclusions from a day-long political scouting trip with Oliver Quayle, the national pollster, in this middle-income Nixon land with its neat homes and apartments and its strong identification with the silent majority ("You're in Archie Bunker land," a 24-year-old dental student said).

Quayle and his field director, Eleanor Seaman, picked this area, the 29th and 30th election districts, for one reason: it went for Mr. Nixon by an overwhelming majority last November.

The inclination of most of the 69 voters we interviewed was: Give the President the benefit of the doubt but treat his party and administration far more harshly.

For example, our voters (who voted 5 to 1 for Mr. Nixon over Sen. George McGovern) agreed by a 2 to 1 margin that they "think less of the Nixon Administration be-

cause they are not telling the whole truth about Watergate." But by exactly the same 2 to 1 margin, they said they disagreed with the statement: "I think less of Richard Nixon because of the Watergate conspiracy."

Likewise, despite the fact that all but 11 of our voters had heard about Watergate, they gave the President the very high score of 65 percent on Quayle's trust index, and an almost equally high 62 percent overall job rating.

But these same voters ranked "honesty and integrity in politics and government" as the third most important issue facing the country, after the economy and crime. The reason most often cited: Watergate.

The President's growing vulnerability, moreover, is clear from the fact that 25 voters said they believed he personally was aware of plans to bug the Watergate, while only 21 believed he knew nothing about it (the rest saying they were not sure).

As for the President's handling of the issue of corruption in government and politics, 43 said he is doing "only fair or poor," more than twice the 20 who gave him an "excellent or good" rating.

THE POTENTIAL for political disaster inherent in Watergate lies in the radically changed view of Mr. Nixon by seven of our voters, all lifetime Republicans and all Nixon voters in November.

Each of these seven, comprising 10 percent of our total sample, volunteered their growing worry and anger about the scandal before we mentioned the word "Watergate" in our questions, and each gave the President a low performance rating, less than six months after enthusiastically voting for him.