

Why Nixon Decided to Act

By David Murray

WASHINGTON — (CST) — President Nixon began to change his policy of ignoring the Watergate scandal only after he was told that otherwise six key Republican senators planned to quit when their terms were up in 1974, it was learned today.

The date was March 20; the place, the oval office of the White House.

Sen. Hugh Scott (R-Pa.), the Senate minority leader, had come with other prominent senators to renew his plea that Nixon speak out and reassure the voters on the scandal and the cover-up that was being rapidly uncovered in each day's newspapers.

The President, according to well-placed Senate sources, showed little apparent interest in Scott's presentation until he told him that six of the 15 Republican senators up for re-election next year had confided to him that they could not run unless some action was taken by the White House to dispel the clouds of mistrust and suspicion that they said covered their home states.

All Conservatives

The six — all conservatives — reportedly were

George Aiken of Vermont, Henry Bellmon of Oklahoma, Marlow Cook of Kentucky, Norris Cotton of New Hampshire, Peter Dominick of Colorado and William Saxbe of Ohio.

"It was then that the President — who is a gut politician himself — really began to get interested," said one strategically placed Senate aide.

Rep. Gerald Ford (R-Mich.) the House minority leader, also had communicated to Nixon his fears that the Watergate fallout might spell disaster for Republican candidates unless the President took some specific action.

The date, March 20, was the day before Judge Sirica, presiding over the Watergate bugging trial, announced that James McCord, convicted of burglary, conspiracy and illegal wiretapping, had written a letter indicating his willingness to name names.

Tide of Opinion

Later, Nixon announced that he had put into motion his own investigation of Watergate and the cover-up the next day—March 21.

The senators who reportedly threatened not to run apparently did not come in a

body to Scott to tell of their problems back home.

Rather, in conversations with him over a period of weeks, each had separately indicated that he could not seek re-election with the tide of public opinion flowing in the direction it was.

The six formed the majority of Scott's "floating coalition" of conservative support — support that had effectively blocked a move by Sen. Howard Baker (R-Tenn.) to oust Scott as leader.

Ample Evidence

Aiken is the senior member of the Senate, with 32 years of service. Cotton has been in the Senate 19 years and Dominick for 10 years.

Bellmon, Cook and Saxbe all came to the Senate in 1968.

Senate sources said there was ample evidence to suggest that the threatened loss of these six GOP wheelhorses pushed Nixon out of his previous position that he could ride out the storm without severe damage to the party.

Some GOP congressional sources now fervently believe that the cover-up and its resulting political damage to Nixon and his loyalists in Congress gives the moderates a golden opportunity to wrest control of the party from the White House.