

Nixon Ignored Warnings From Republican Pros

Ironies abound in the Watergate case, where people risked their careers and the reputation of their government to obtain information that was never needed. But the supreme irony is that Richard Nixon, the party man extraordinary, tarnished his personal mandate because he failed to listen to the concerns and complaints of his own party.

Mr. Nixon's reputation during his long career in public life was built upon the foundation of unremitting party service. When the Republican Party needed a spokesman during the non-ideological reign of Dwight Eisenhower in the 1950s, Dick Nixon took to

The writer is a member of the national staff of The Washington Post.

the stump and spread the hard-line party gospel from coast to coast. When prudent Republicans were spending their time at fishing resorts or were otherwise incommunicado during the Goldwater campaign in 1964, Dick Nixon spoke ceaselessly in behalf of the floundering GOP presidential candidate.

When some Republicans doubted the wisdom of a mid-year congressional campaign based vaguely on the notion that Democratic candidates were soft on "law and order," President Nixon left the White House in 1970 and sounded the tocsin for a mixed bag of Republican nominees.

The failure of that 1970 campaign, which the White House alternatively blamed on the people and the press, helped move the President in a different direction during 1972. Mr. Nixon already was isolated from the normal discontents of partisan politics by the staff system he had established, a system which required even top aides to reduce their arguments to writing and which funneled access to the President through the office of H.R. Haldeman. And for the first time, Mr. Nixon seemed in 1972 to be more popular than his party. He accordingly turned his back on the GOP and set up his private apparatus at the Committee for the Re-Election of the President (CRP).

In doing so, he made a conscious decision to worry about his own re-election campaign and let Republican congressional and gubernatorial candidates fend for themselves. But he also cut himself off from the warnings about CRP that came from the best-informed Republicans—his own party chairmen.

These warnings were available to Mr. Nixon, if he had chosen to accept them, long before the conviction of the Watergate Seven, long before the implicating statements of James McCord and John Dean III, long before polls began showing public awareness of the Watergate issue, long before the Senate rejection of L. Patrick Gray III.

From the first, Republicans were appalled by the high-handedness of officials from the re-election committee, which they dubbed with the acronym of "Creep."

In place of a carefully nourished registration and precinct campaign aimed at helping the Republican ticket, CRP officials pushed a well-publicized promotion campaign aimed at convincing Americans that the backbone of Mr. Nixon's support was really an ethnic-oriented "new majority" plus young voters who had been turned off by Sen. George McGovern. State party finance officials complained that the fund-raising efforts for Mr. Nixon, even when polls showed him far ahead, drained the financial resources of GOP contributors and left very little for state and local Republican candidates.

The entire issue came to a boil at

Miami Beach last Aug. 17 during a closed meeting of state chairmen called by then-Party Chairman Bob Dole. At that meeting, Chairmen John Andrews of Ohio and Charles Lanigan of New York, among others, complained that bungling by the CRP was endangering the party campaigns in their states.

Lanigan said that one CRP official even had called up his office to ask if the governor of New York was elected or appointed. "They're the biggest bunch of fumlbers I've ever seen," he concluded.

The issue of the Watergate bugging was also raised at that private meeting, and it was raised by Bob Dole.

"Something has to be done and done soon," Dole said in language that now seems prophetic. "If there's anything that's going to come out, it ought to come out now and not on the 28th of October." He asked the chairmen whether they agreed that the Watergate issue was important and received an affirmative show of hands.

The state chairmen, of course, did not know the dimensions of the Water-



gate case nor did they know of the involvement of White House staff and CRP officials. But they are vastly more aware as a group than Mr. Nixon's top staff has ever been of the power of scandal to destroy governance. They also are accustomed to listening, an ability which never distinguished the reelection committee.

Haldeman and the White House ignored the complaints of the chairmen and tried to close the leaks instead of redressing the complaints. After an account of the meeting between Dole and the chairmen appeared in The Washington Post, various White House and CRP officials called the chairmen named in the story and told them of their displeasure. The chairmen, who wanted CRP cooperation and financial help in their own states, backed down and never said in public what they had been complaining about privately. Secure in their runaway lead over McGovern and untroubled by the problems of other Republicans, the men around the President ignored the state parties for most of the subsequent campaign. After Miami Beach, an uneasy truce was established between the two campaign organizations but most Republican candidates ran their reelection efforts without ever getting any help from the White House or the CRP.

In popular mythology, party officials are cigar-chewing hacks who perform all manner of disreputable favors and rarely raise ethical questions. In practice they are frequently rather scrupulous people whose word is of necessity their bond and who are far more sensitive to ethical issues than public officials isolated within the splendor of their office. Whether Mr. Nixon was personally isolated from the conspiracy which led to Watergate has yet to be determined. What is known beyond doubt is that the President failed to listen to his own party chairmen, whose distant early warnings at Miami Beach were drowned out by the clamor for a new majority.