

Democrats Consider Talk Of Impeachment Premature

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Senate Democratic Whip Robert C. Byrd (W. Va.) said yesterday that talk of impeaching President Nixon at this time "is at best premature and at worst reckless."

Byrd, speaking a day after the President's latest public statement on his role in the Watergate affair, said, "There is no hard evidence to date linking the President either to the planning or the commission of the criminal acts or even to the attempted cover-up."

Calling impeachment "a last resort," Byrd said, "For the moment, let the duly constituted congressional committees and the courts proceed as their duty binds them to do."

The statement by the powerful senator reflects a widely shared Democratic desire to stifle talk that might sound like attempts to take partisan advantage of Watergate. A survey of House and Senate this week suggests that Watergate has damaged but not destroyed the President's prestige on Capitol Hill, and that much

of the damage can be repaired if his Watergate involvement proves to be no deeper than shown so far.

Republican congressional leaders emerged from a morning meeting with the President yesterday voicing praise for his Tuesday statement and declaring that a new relationship is being molded between the White House and Capitol Hill.

Senate Minority Leader Hugh Scott (Pa.) and House GOP Leader Gerald R. Ford (Mich.) told reporters that Mr. Nixon has agreed to

See IMPACT, A10, Col. 1

IMPACT, From A1

meet with Republican congressional leaders from time to time in a new format—one in which consultation and a cross-fertilization of ideas will be encouraged.

In the past, GOP leaders have complained of lack of intimate access to the President and opportunity to outline their ideas and problems directly to him, without H.R. Haldeman, John Ehrlichman or other staffers as intermediaries.

Scott said the President at the leaders' request, had now agreed to periodic direct meetings at which the GOP leaders could, in ef-

fect, be the ones presenting ideas instead of merely being briefed by White House staff aides on legislative decisions already made at the White House.

Describing the President's mood, Scott said he is "strong and of good heart and purpose."

Byrd's remarks on impeachment mirror a view widely held by congressional Democrats that talk of impeachment at this stage would rally Republicans to close ranks behind the President.

Interviews with more than 20 Democratic senators and key aides, as well as a number of top House Democrats, indicate that if the Democrats have any political strategy at this point, it is to back carefully away from impeachment talk or partisan attacks, while being equally careful to see that the facts about the Watergate are not only fully brought out but receive the maximum public exposure.

By fostering the Senate investigation being conducted by Sam J. Ervin Jr. (D-N.C.), by insisting on the appointment of a virtually independent special prosecutor by Attorney General-designate Elliot L. Richardson, by probing CIA links to the case, Democrats on Capitol Hill are having considerable impact on the course of the Watergate situation. But they are doing it in a relatively quiet, businesslike fashion without direct partisan attacks.

There has been some impeachment talk by a handful of House Democrats, and Rep. John E. Moss (D-Calif.) has been trying to line up support for a committee of inquiry to gather facts for use in case impeachment

proceedings become viable. And some Democrats, like Rep. Don Fraser (D-Minn.), the national chairman of the Americans for Democratic Action, think Mr. Nixon should resign.

But Democratic leaders like Mike Mansfield (D-Mont.) and Byrd as well as top House Democrats have discouraged the impeachment talk as premature. One House spokesman said, "There has to be a quantum jump in grassroots outrage before it is reasonable to discuss impeachment. It is not the talk at Georgetown cocktail parties, but in Albuquerque that is important."

Rep. Charles Vanik (D-Ohio) said in an interview earlier this week, "Interest in Watergate diminishes the further you get away from Washington."

A second key question on Capitol Hill is: How much have the Watergate revelations undermined President Nixon's legislative power?

Interviews in both chambers, as well as an analysis of several important votes in the House and Senate, suggest that while Mr. Nixon's prestige and legislative clout have undoubtedly been damaged, he hasn't been destroyed.

His legislative strength is weaker but not totally eroded. The loss of confidence and respect hasn't so far translated itself into large numbers of opposition votes.

Moreover, there is agreement that if there aren't any further revelations personally implicating him, he may well recover much of his lost legislative clout, though perhaps not all.

"Nixon has been hurt," said Rep. Joe D. Waggoner (D-La.), a leader of Southern

conservatives who has been close to the President and frequently helped organize legislative victories for him in the House. "Whether he has been crippled is too soon to say."

House Majority Leader Thomas P. O'Neill (D-Mass.) said the Watergate situation will eventually help the Democrats on legislation, though it didn't yesterday on an attempt to override a veto. "There isn't the same clout at the White House as when Ehrlichman and Haldeman had the power to twist arms. No one fills that void. I think Republicans will be voting their district more."

Senate Republican Whip Robert P. Griffin (Mich.) said, "It has hurt, but I don't know how much. I don't think as much as people assume. So far it hasn't translated into votes. It is altogether possible that as more and more people become convinced his detailed statement lays questions to rest, he can rebuild the kind of support he once had."

"It's hurt him considerably, certainly in the short run. In the long run, it remains to be seen," said Byrd. "It depends on whether the facts implicate the President. But it can't be put in terms of votes lost." Byrd explained that it was more a matter of gradual ebbing of confidence in the Nixon administration, the cumulative impact of which would be felt later.

"His effectiveness has been impaired on the Republican side as well as the Democratic," said Sen. Henry M. Jackson (D-Wash.). "I don't want to say shattered. He can retrieve some of it, but there are irretreiv-

able scars. If the evidence is clear and convincing that he didn't have anything to do even with the cover-up, then he could retrieve much. But that's absent right now."

"My own hunch is that barring new and unsuspected revelations, the impact would last two or three months or perhaps the whole session, but possibly by next fall he will be back in business—provided nothing new comes out," said Sen. Norris Cotton (R-N.H.).

Cotton said, however, that even if the President doesn't regain his past legislative strength, the impact on specific Senate votes might not be too great, since senators tend to base their votes more on the issues than on whether the White House is for or against a bill.

For example, the President favors spending cuts, Cotton said. "Many of us feel very strongly that we have got to call a halt to excessive spending. If the President was in jail, I'd still vote to cut spending," said Cotton.

On the other hand, said Cotton, his new position of support for anti-Cambodia bombing proposals stems from a fear of new long-term involvement in another Indochina war, not from any desire to punish or separate himself from the President on Watergate.

In one Senate test vote so far, Watergate hasn't had much apparent impact. Earlier this week the Senate overrode a presidential veto for the first time this year, on the budget director confirmation bill, by a 62 to 22 vote. However, the same bill had passed 73 to 19 three weeks ago, before the major Watergate revelations came.



By Charles Del Vecchio—The Washington Post

Sen. Scott and Rep. Ford brief newsmen on their meeting with the President

Watergate appears to have had little significant impact on either of the two major House votes cast since it became a large issue.

The House cast its first antiwar vote in opposing U.S. bombing in Cambodia,

but this was probably inevitable since members thought the war had ended and were fearful of its revival. In any case, the anti-bombing victory was engineered by Democrats with only a handful of new Republican defections.

In yesterday's House vote to sustain the President's veto of the budget director bill, the margin was the same by which it initially passed the bill three weeks ago—the vote was short this time because of the two-thirds rule on overriding.