

Watergate: Little '74 Effect

By David S. Broder

Washington Post Staff Writer

From an editorial in the latest issue of the Ohio Republican News, a state GOP publication:

"There are, of course, many personal tragedies in Watergate. But the real tragedy for the people of Ohio would come if we allowed it to obscure the record of the current administration in the state house. The issue in Ohio is the operation of the Gilligan administration."

From a new Democratic National Committee fund-raising letter, signed by party Chairman Robert S. Strauss:

"If ever there was a time to join forces with the Democrats, it is now.

I could give you many reasons why you should, but they all narrow down to Watergate and continuing efforts by the Nixon administration to suppress the truth."

From a letter received last week by Rep. Bob Michel of Illinois, chairman of the Republican Congressional Campaign Committee, from a man in Fort Worth, Texas:

"Dear Mr. Chairman: Your reminder of a payment of \$7.50 on a pledge to the National Republican Congressional Committee is herewith acknowledged. However, I will not honor this pledge until after the Watergate question is thoroughly resolved.

"Yes, I realize that money for this incredible, and stupid, immoral and

thoughtless act came from the Committee to Re-elect the President, and not from your committee. And I further realize that my action is going to make it even harder to elect Republicans to Congress in 1974.

"But I am sick up to six feet over my head with this mess. And I know no way to move the White House, and President Nixon, into a much more open stance than for grass-roots Republicans to raise a howl of protest. This, sir, is the beginning of my howl."

Last week, the "howl" of Watergate was filling the ears of politicians everywhere—from a million-dollar Democratic fund-raising dinner in Washington, where it was the topic of an endless stream of comedians' jokes, to St.

but Aftershock for Years

Paul, Minn., where state Sen. J. Robert Stassen suggested last week that Watergate "may be the catalyst" that will cause his state party to change its name.

Urging that the Minnesota GOP rechristen itself as the Independent-Republican Party, Stassen said, "This would serve to remind Minnesota voters that the GOP in Minnesota is a slightly different animal—which we are."

The revelations and charges of illegal activities by members of the Nixon administration and the President's campaign committee have shredded last winter's assumptions about the direction of national politics.

The most obvious impact has been the

reversal of political fortunes for the President, whose Gallup Poll approval rating has skidded from a late January peak of 69 per cent to last week's 45 per cent. Gallup officials said they were aware of no precedent for that severe a decline in a chief executive's standing in a comparable brief period.

There have been equally dramatic effects on some—but not all—Republican fund-raising, and Watergate has cost the GOP several promising potential candidates for 1974.

But interviews last week with campaign officials of both parties found bipartisan skepticism that Watergate is now—or likely to become—the determinative issue in next year's elec-

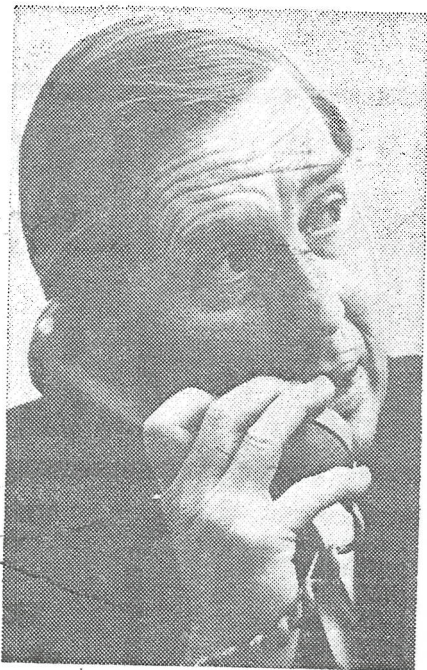
tion, let alone the distant 1976 presidential contest.

"If I was a Democrat, I wouldn't count on it (the Watergate issue) to win for me," said Edward Mahe Jr., the new director of political activities for the Republican National Committee.

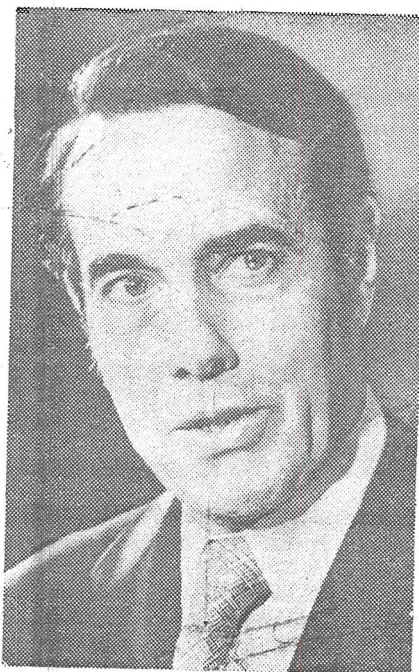
"My fear," said his counterpart, Democratic National Committee executive director Robert J. Keefe, "is that a lot of our guys may think it's the ultimate in campaign issues and fail to do things that really do win elections."

By every measure the issue of Watergate and governmental corruption

See POLITICS, A16, Col. 1



SEN. LLOYD BENTSEN
... fund-raising easier



SEN. BOB DOLE
... re-election harder



KEVIN PHILLIPS
... mooring is looser

POLITICS, From A1

ranks well down the list of voters' current concerns. A Gallup Poll last week found in mentioned one-fourth as often as inflation. Virtually every politician interviewed Gallop Poll last week found agreed that the health of the economy next year will have more effect on the election than the current Watergate revelations.

Yet, the same politicians and the men who analyze public opinion for them believe that the revelations of the past two months have hit the electorate so hard that the aftershocks may be felt in our politics for years, to come.

Among the sometimes contradictory immediate and long-term consequences they foresee:

- The erasure of the Republicans' financial advantage and perhaps the creation of new difficulties for candidates of both parties in raising campaign funds.

- An immediate blow to the morale and the momentum of the Republican Party, but an even stronger increase in public disenchantment with both parties.

- A worsening of the odds on a Republican victory in 1974, but not necessarily the elimination of Mr. Nixon's long-held dream of a "new majority."

- The passage of new campaign spending "reforms" that could help entrench incumbents of both parties, but an offsetting public revulsion at politicians in general that could cause those same incumbents added problems.

- A general disillusionment with the political process that would reduce voting participation, open the way for emergence of a new party, or even—so some fear—pave the way for the emergence of "a man on a white horse."

Kevin Phillips, the conservative political theorist who predicted "the emerging Republican majority" in a book of that title, said the polling data he has seen in recent weeks indicates that "the country is looser from its political moorings than it has ever been before."

Agreeing with this view was Patrick Caddell, pollster for last year's McGovern-for-President campaign, whose Cambridge Survey Research firm has had polls in several major states in recent weeks.

Caddell said that Watergate has created "a whole new dynamic" in American politics, reflecting mainly pervasive public cynicism about all politicians and unprecedented pessimism about the nation's future. "If it sustains itself," he said, "it will define new rules for politics."

That is also the view of Frederick Currier, head of Market Opinion Research Corp., the Detroit firm that coordinated polling in the Nixon campaign.

"Watergate is less of an issue today than the economy," Currier said, "but it will continue to climb, because it is a negative issue to which no one sees any answer. Because people see it as part of a total corruption of our politics, it will have a pervasive effect on the core vote of both parties and on the ticket-splitters. The ticket-splitters are the most affected."

Phillips, Caddell and Currier all agreed that the major effect of Watergate so far has not been to hurt Republican candidates but politicians as a group. "An incumbent of either party has fresh reason to worry," Caddell said.

It also appears that both parties are suffering in public esteem. Daily polling by the Sindlinger organization found that between late April and mid-May, the percentage of political independents rose 2.2 per cent—a marked shift for so short a period. Three-fifths of the increase came at the expense of the Republicans, but the Democrats also dropped almost a full percentage point.

Despite this survey data, the feeling of most politicians in Washington was summed up by the AFL-CIO official who said, "This may hurt all the politicians, but it can't help but be worse for the Republicans than the Democrats."

One place the GOP is clearly hurting is in the pocketbook. "It's really turned around," said Sen. Lloyd Bentsen of Texas, new chairman of the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee, after last Wednesday's successful party fund-raiser. "From now on, they'll find it harder to raise funds, and we'll find it easier."

Democratic National Com-

mittee officials said the percentage of responses on direct-mail campaigns has doubled—from 2 per cent to 4 per cent—since they switched to a Watergate theme about a month ago.

Some of the party faithful are responding to an appeal to make additional contributions, beyond their regular pledges, to finance the Democrats' civil suit against the Committee for the Re-election of the President.

The Republicans are still far ahead, however in the dollar volume of small contributions. Robert Roussek, spokesman for the Republican National Committee, said it had received \$2.3 million in small contributions through May 18—\$200,000 more than in the comparable period of the last off-year, 1971.

"Where we are hurting," Roussek said, "is with the large givers." The recent \$1,000-a-plate Republican fund-raiser in Washington drew only \$750,000—just half the amount taken in at the same sort of event two years ago. Roussek said the national committee could count fewer than a hundred \$1,000 contributors this year.

"A lot of them," said Representative Michel, the GOP congressional committee head, "are just concerned that more than was needed was solicited last year—and in a pretty vigorous, arm-twisting way."

Most of that "arm-twisting" was done by Maurice Stans on behalf of CRP. But repeated efforts by regular Republican groups to tell their contributors they are untainted by scandal have had only mixed success, as the letter to Michel quoted earlier indicates.

The added irony of the situation is that the surplus \$4.7 million reported by CRP, which once seemed likely to finance next year's GOP candidates, seems to be fading into the mists.

"I don't expect to see any of that money," said Sen. Bill Brock of Tennessee, chairman of the Republican Senatorial Campaign Committee. "I imagine it will be tied up in court cases for some time."

Michel added that even if the CRP money were released, "a lot of our candidates would be a little squeamish about taking it. I'm afraid the press would label it tainted money."

A further GOP worry is that congressional Democrats, accustomed to majority status, may seize on the current scandal to fasten even tighter limits on campaign spending—to their own benefit.

The GOP's Mahe, for one, denounced talk of imposing a ceiling of 25 cents per voter on all campaign costs as "sheer asininity. These guys across the street (in the Capitol) are just using this (scandal) to lock themselves in," the GOP campaign official said. "You

can't defeat an incumbent on 25 cents a vote."

Despite these concerns, Republicans are not pessimistic about holding their own in the 1974 elections. A few notable challengers—such as acting FBI Director William D. Ruckelshaus, who had been the main hope to take on Sen. Birch Bayh (D-Ind.)—have been forced to disavow their candidacies by their new roles in post-Watergate Washington.

But Brock and Michel both insisted they are interviewing a steady stream of promising young contenders for Senate and House seats. And Mahe, the overall GOP campaign coordinator, said, "I still think that '74 potentially can be a good year for us—not as good as it might have been, maybe, but if we can keep the economy going good and cut inflation, still a good year."

Mahe based his judgment largely on the view that "Watergate is not a gut issue. It doesn't affect your pocketbook, your health, your wife's safety or your son's life. The further you get west of Washington, the clearer that becomes."

Mahe's judgment appeared to be at odds with last week's Louis Harris Survey, crediting Democrats with a 48-to-35 per cent lead in congressional voting—a lead which Harris said could produce the heaviest Democratic congressional majorities since the 1930s.

But at Democratic headquarters, executive director Keefe agreed with his cross-town Republican counterpart that no landslide of Harris' dimensions is in sight.

"Watergate has helped us on the intangibles," Keefe said. "The Republicans are on the defensive, trying to disassociate themselves from their own leaders and previous statements. Two months ago, it looked like they were going to be able to blame all the country's problems on the Democrats in Congress; now, we have a better chance to blame them on Mr. Nixon."

But the expectation of officials in both parties is that most Republican candidates will emphasize their independence and their own set of issues, rather than tying themselves closely to the Nixon administration.

Nowhere has the process been more visible than in Kansas, where Sen. Bob Dole faces a potentially serious re-election challenge next year.

Dole has a special problem, because he was chairman of the Republican Na-

tional Committee during the Watergate period. As a Kansas Democrat said, "Bob Dole spent two years telling everyone here how close he was to the President, and now he's got to spend two years telling them he never knew the man."

That is almost literally the case. Dole last week told Kansas interviewers that Mr. Nixon should "come out in the open and face the public" if he wants his denials of complicity in Watergate to be believed. Dole also stressed that Senate testimony proved that "most of the people at CRP headquarters did not know who I was."

Whether the effect of Watergate goes beyond the problems of individual Republican candidates, like Dole, and undercuts Mr. Nixon's whole strategy of a "new majority" is a matter of debate.

Phillips, the theorist of the conservative realignment, said the process he predicted "is hung up by this, but not terminated."

On the other hand, Bentzen, whose home state of Texas is a prime target of the "new majority," noted that in the wake of Watergate, not a single elected Democratic official has followed John Connally's switch to the GOP. "I think," he said, "they're going to find the South a tough nut to crack."

The kind of broad coalition Mr. Nixon hoped to assemble for the GOP—the kind he enjoyed last November—has shown signs of cracking.

AFL-CIO President George Meany, a tacit supporter of the President last

fall, has escalated his anti-administration rhetoric in recent weeks, and his staff members were prominent at last Wednesday's Democratic fund-raising dinner.

At the other end of the "new majority" spectrum, conservative Republicans have shown surprising sharpness with the President. The American Conservative Union's directors last weekend called on Mr. Nixon to reform "not only the White House staff but his own national and international policies," warning that if he attempted now to "move leftward as a sop to the liberals and the press, he can expect concerted resistance from those within conservative ranks who have . . . provided him with essential political support."

Perhaps the best measure of the change in the GOP view was expressed by Michel, who took over as congressional committee chairman in March.

"I had a feeling of real optimism," the Illinois congressman recalled last week. "With the war behind us and the President riding high, I thought he'd really focus on domestic issues, and his vetoes would make it easy to define the differences between the parties on the spending question."

"By gorry, Michel said, "I thought we could really do it. Now, we're going through a period of uncertainty. I can't be sure how much all this will erode support for the President. . . . Watergate has really thrown a roadblock into the momentum we had built up, and November, 1974, may come quicker than we want."

Oddly, Watergate has held in the Republican Party one

of Michel's House colleagues who looked as if he was ready to declare himself out of the GOP.

Rep. Paul N. (Pete) McCloskey of California, who challenged Mr. Nixon in the early 1972 primaries on the issues of the Vietnam war and truth in government, had announced in March that he was re-registering as an independent.

Two weeks ago, McCloskey changed his mind and said he would remain a Republican.

"The people I had my quarrel with are essentially removed," he said, "and the people I have the greatest confidence in have the leadership."

Keeping McCloskey Republican may not be exactly Mr. Nixon's favorite strategy for building "the new majority," but it is, it appears, another of the varied results of Watergate.