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Subject A for Governors: Watergate

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The Watergate scandal hung over the 65th National Governors Conference this week like a damp, depressing fog, spreading uneasiness among the politically sensitive Governors and leaving its own particular imprint in many states.

It was Subject A here as the Governors tried to divide their time between their distracted business sessions in the conference hall of the Sahara Tahoe casino and the golf course and tennis courts.

But the Republican governors really did not want to talk about it. And the Democrats tried hard to restrain their relief that it had happened to a Republican President while they insisted that they, like all elected officials, had suffered from an increase in the public's suspicion.

Rockefeller and Reagan

National Governors conferences are usually an ideal ground on which hopeful Presidential candidates can maneuver. The Presidential conventions of both parties are still three years away, and no one here wanted to get himself identified just now either with President Nixon or any of the possible candidates in 1976.

Governor Rockefeller of New York, often the center of liberal Republican attention at these affairs, attended only a day and a half of the three-day conference, staying long enough to deliver a sermon-like report on human resources in the only closed session the Governors held.

Mr. Rockefeller also suggested considering a 55-mile-an-hour speed limit on all of the nation's highways to conserve gasoline, a proposal that was not embraced by the governors.

Gov. Ronald Reagan of California, a hero to many conservative Republicans, arrived midway through the first day with a plan for a constitutional limit on state taxes, which he released to the press with great fanfare. But his presentation of it was also limited to the executive sessions and even his conservative Republican allies showed no interest in it.

Vice President Agnew, who attends these conferences as the White House liaison officer and chief G.O.P. catalyst, came in quietly on Tuesday, played tennis, and met privately with a few of the 19 Republican governors.

Before he left midway through yesterday's closing session and said he had come only to listen this time.

"We are not in a position to define anything in the domestic sense just now," he told reporters.

Many Governors of both parties complained that the Nixon Administration had been paralyzed since early March by its preoccupation with the Watergate affair. The difficulties many of them said they were having sorting out the President's revenue-sharing programs had been increased by Watergate.

McCall Finds Harm

"It's really exacerbated an already bad situation between the states and Washington," said Gov. Jimmy Carter of Georgia, a Democrat. "We couldn't find out much before about what we were to get under the President's 'new federalism.' We can't find out anything now."

"But at least Watergate has

taken some of the self-righteousness away from the Republicans in Georgia," he continued. "They've got a real problem now of how to stay away from Nixon without driving off the diehard Nixon supporters they depended on before."

In Oregon, Gov. Tom McCall, a Republican believes the Watergate scandal was a factor in the recent defeat by Oregon voters of his plan to shift education taxation to the state and reduce local property taxes.

"After those daily revelations from Washington, people in Oregon just couldn't believe anything an officeholder told them," he said. "They just wouldn't believe the advantage we were promising them if they had vote 'yes.'"

Governor McCall, one of the most outspoken of the liberal Republicans, confirmed that he may become a Democrat or at least an independent if he runs for the Senate next year against Senator Robert W. Packwood, a Republican.

"But it really wasn't because of the Watergate," he said. "I had been thinking about it even before it got so bad. The Democrats in Oregon have been giving me a lot more support than the Republicans have."

In Minnesota, Watergate has been particularly unsettling to that state's Republicans, who were already quarreling among themselves over their relations with the Republican National Committee.

Robert Stassen, a nephew of Harold Stassen and a party leader, has urged the Republicans to change the party's name to the Minnesota Independent Republicans.

Effect in Oklahoma

Gov. Christopher S. Bond, the young Missouri Republican, said he had been as shocked as many other Governors by Watergate.

"But strangely enough I can find something positive from it," he said. "I'd been urging election reform on my Democratic-controlled legislature and getting nowhere. But after the Watergate broke so wide, they suddenly tacked on a disclosure

amendment to a bill I wanted anyway."

Oklahoma's once struggling Republicans had been gaining in strength since the Eisenhower years. The Watergate affair has been unsettling there.

"It's hard to tell exactly what people in Oklahoma are thinking, any time," said Gov. David Hall, a Democrat. "But the Watergate mess has certainly raised my party chances, 60 to 40 per cent, of taking back the only Congressional seats the Republicans still hold and of winning the Senate next year."

"You know," he continued, "Senator Henry Belmon, a solid Republican, was so upset by it he said at first he would not run again in 1974. President Nixon had to make a special plea to him to change his mind."

"So many Federal programs are going to come to an end in Ohio by the first of July that I've advised our Republican-dominated legislature to get out of town before they are overwhelmed by irate taxpayers," said Gov. John J. Gilligan, a Democrat.

"We've got three weeks before our fiscal year ends and the Watergate mess has tied up Washington so thoroughly we can't find out what Federal money should go into our budget and what Federal programs are going to end. It will sure pay to be out of Columbus this summer."

But Gov. Daniel J. Evans of Washington, the keynote speaker at the 1968 Republican convention and the new chairman of the National Governors Conference, said he saw some gains for his party from the Watergate scandal.

"Republicans in Washington are actually now more willing to contribute to the party organization in the state, because they've been shown the evils of a separate campaign committee," he said.

"And Ted Agnew is finding the isolation and frustration he's suffered in the last five years may be one of the best things that have happened to him. He is free from the Watergate at least," Governor Evans said.



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Fred D. Thompson, right, chief minority counsel to the Senate select committee, listening in as Republican committee members, Lowell P. Weicker Jr., left, Howard H. Baker Jr., standing, and Edward J. Gurney conferred.