

Mr. Nixon's

Labor Day

Trap

In the summer of 1971, Richard Nixon froze prices and shared with the public the secret of his diplomatic overtures to China. By those two actions, he reversed a long decline in his political fortunes and put himself on the road to re-election as President.

In the summer of 1973, Mr. Nixon ended another price freeze and decided to withhold from the public the secrets contained in the White House records related to Watergate.

By these actions, he may have put himself on the road to a premature departure from the presidency.

Prophecy is not the business of journalism, but it takes no prophet to report that Mr. Nixon has now created the precise combination of circumstances that could lead to a serious demand for his resignation. It has been evident for some time that:

- The Democratic leaders of Congress were extremely reluctant to assume political responsibility for resolving the crisis of government by seeking impeachment of the President.

- The question of Mr. Nixon's tenure, therefore, would be settled within the leadership group of the Republican Party.

- Republican leaders would call on him to step aside if, and only if, public disaffection with both his economic policies and his Watergate explanations reach the point that it threatened disaster for the party.

- The "crunch" would come soon after Labor Day when the congressional Republicans return from the August recess and discuss among themselves the mood of their constituents.

All that was evident—and was noted here—a month ago.

By his decisions of the past 10 days, Mr. Nixon has made that "worst case" scenario less implausible than when it was first suggested, but it is still something short of a probability. His actions have deepened the Labor Day trap. Whatever is the long-term consequences of his new economic policy, its wisdom or merit, Phase IV guarantees that the wage-earners the Republican congressmen will meet next month will be angry and upset by skyrocketing food prices. Whatever its legal constitutional rationalization, the President's refusal to make public the tapes of his Watergate discussions seriously diminishes the plausibility of his defense against the testimony in the Senate hearings.

Thus, on both the economic and Watergate fronts, the President has taken steps which almost certainly raise the possibility that Republican Party leaders will cite an approaching political catastrophe on their home leaves next month.

One can be fairly precise about defining the kind of disaster that would activate the Republican leaders to ask the President to resign. It is the prospect of the Democrats' winning two-third majorities in the House and Senate next year. For the last six years, Republican congressional leaders have been able to influence legislation by skillful bargaining with members of the narrow Democratic majorities. Faced with the threat of being reduced to the impotence they suffered after the Democratic landslides of 1958 and 1964, they would probably rebel.

The prospect of a 1974 Democratic landslide would confront the Republican business and financial backers with the danger that a labor-supported Democratic Congress could pass tax bills, spending bills, regulatory bills, consumer bills, anti-pollution bills, health insurance and welfare bills without worrying about a presidential veto.

Under those circumstances, the Republican congressional leaders would probably have to pay a call on the White House. A signal of their intention could well come from Melvin R. Laird, their trusted former colleague, now serving as domestic counselor to the President.

Laird is in a unique position. He went to the White House after the Haldeman-Ehrlichman resignations, not only at the request of the President, but at the strong urging of his Republican congressional friends. He carries their proxy within the President's circle.

He has said often that he took the job on the explicit assurance from Mr. Nixon that the full facts of the President's role in Watergate were already known and that the truth of the situation would not impair Mr. Nixon's ability to lead a vigorous administration through the next three years. Last week he sent out strong public signals of dissatisfaction. If he walks out, it is a clear warning that Mr. Nixon may be told his own party leaders can no longer defend him.

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