

# Gloom Grips Republican Senators

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## Reversals Erode Support for Nixon

Spencer Rich

Washington Post Staff Writer

President Nixon faces a massive hemorrhaging of support from GOP senators unless he acts immediately to dispel all suspicions of a Watergate coverup, key Senate Republicans warned gloomily yesterday.

The President's esteem among Republican senators, already in peril before yesterday's revelation that two of the Watergate tapes don't exist, was weakened still further by that news.

"I'm shocked, I'm surprised—I thought all the surprises were out of me," said Sen. James B. Pearson (R-Kan.). "I think it will weaken his position very much, not only with the Senate but with the country, and we were getting to the point where we desperately needed something to strengthen it."

Sen. James L. Buckley (Cons-R-N.Y.), said the disclosure "has dramatically shifted the burden of proof. As of this moment, President Nixon has the clear burden of satisfying the American people that he has been speaking the truth. If he fails in this, then we are faced with a political crisis of the most profoundly disturbing proportions."

Sen. Richard S. Schweiker (R-Pa.) called the latest development "another tragedy of credibility in the long crisis of credibility that has engulfed this administration."

Sen. Mark Hatfield (R-Ore.) said the new revelation "dramatically escalates the problem of this administration's credibility."

Senate Minority Leader Hugh Scott (R-Pa.) declined a direct evaluation. But he said, after a meeting in his office with White House aides Alexander M. Haig Jr., Bryce Harlow and Melvin R. Laird, that "there will be information given to Judge Sirica and if Judge Sirica feels it will satisfy him then I feel it will satisfy the general public." John J. Sirica is chief judge of the U.S. District Court here.

The mid-afternoon announcement "ruined my day," groaned a conservative Republican senator.

Even before the latest revelation on the tapes, many GOP senators were glum about the President's declining credibility in the Senate. Eleven members of the Senate-Republican Policy Committee met in a hush-hush early morning session yesterday to discuss what might be done to strengthen the President's deteriorat-

ing position. They concluded that only the appointment of a new Attorney General and special prosecutor of enormous public reputation and proven integrity, plus a clear White House willingness to disclose everything needed to get to the bottom of the Watergate investigation, might save the situation.

"He risks the loss of the troops unless there is total disclosure," said one GOP moderate after the meeting. Milton R. Young (R-N.D.) said, "He'll be hurt in many ways. Republicans will tend to vote more independently."

So far the President's Watergate troubles haven't substantially undermined his general legislative strength.

Even when Republican senators disagree with the President on specific pieces of legislation, some vote his way in order to show loyalty to a beleaguered leader. Moreover, all eight of his vetoes this year have been sustained by either the House or the Senate.

But there are substantial signs now that GOP senators are wearying of the continuing public fuss over Watergate, the administration's constant shifts of position, and continual White House demands for loyalty to positions on which they aren't consulted.

They're not quite ready to jettison the President and scurry for cover, but many are saying privately that the President has very little string and not too much credibility left on the Senate side of the Hill.

Unless he acts decisively now to make clear that he is ready to allow a full Watergate investigation without interference and let the chips fall where they may, "GOP senators would leave in droves," as one Republican put it in an interview yesterday.

"You will see some otherwise totally loyal Republicans going off the reservation," he added, "especially on issues like overriding Labor-HEW fund vetoes, impoundment and the war powers bill."

Sen. Bob Dole (R-Kan.), former GOP national chairman, who is running for reelection to the Senate next year, said in an interview, "I don't have any sense that GOP senators are ready to abandon the President yet, but you get tired of those

constant (White House) phone calls saying, 'Hang on, keep with us, tough it out.'"

"I'm like everyone else. I don't know what the facts are in the Watergate situation. But you get tired of sticking your neck out and having it chopped off," Dole said.

Referring to what he called "politically unwise decisions taken without Hill input," another Republican said, "what Bob is obviously referring to is the inconsistency—the firing of Cox, Ruckelshaus and Richardson, the adamancy on not giving up the tapes, and then the total turnaround. It's difficult to defend a position unless you know why it's taken. They make these decisions, then they call you and tell you to put out a statement saying this a great, and you're not sure what they've done, and why it's supposed to be great—or whether it is."

It is common White House practice to send up skeleton speeches defending the President, or "talk sheets" listing the administration arguments, and ask GOP senators to use them as the basis for floor speeches.

A week and a half ago, for

exam. the White House sent GOP leader Hugh Scott (R-Pa.) a "talk sheet" arguing that inflammatory attacks on the President and the distraction of Watergate were undermining his ability to conduct foreign policy at a time of great crisis. Scott routinely distributed copies to all GOP senators, and later that day three GOP loyalists made speeches which appeared to reflect the talk sheet with fidelity.

Yesterday's policy committee meeting was presided over by Chairman John Tower of Texas. It reached no formal position, but two participants said that, out of considerable discussion and dispute, the dominant theme was: What's at issue is total disclosure and the selection of men as Attorney General and special prosecutor of total public confidence.

Another participant expressed surprise at how pessimistic some conservatives sounded about Mr. Nixon's ability to restore his credibility. "Some of them," he said, "almost seemed to be going on the assumption that the President is finished, and that the big problem now is how to save the party."