

## 'Your Weakness Is Credibility'

# Nixon Hears It Straight

Washington

Robert Packwood, a 41-year-old first-term Republican senator from Oregon, was a supporter of President Nixon in the earlier stages of the Vietnam war and on the antiballistic missile, but lately he had come to view Watergate as a symbol of rot in American public life.

He had waited months to tell the President why.

With ten other Republican

senators Thursday night, he was ushered into the White House solarium — newly christened the "California Room."

### COMPREHENSIVE

After a drink, a few social amenities, he and his colleagues sat in an oval around the President, who relaxed in an over-stuffed chair. Four White House aides, including press secretary Ronald Ziegler, were also there.

Others preceded him.

But Packwood's statement was the most comprehensive one, according to presidential aides, during the whole series of congressional meetings this week.

Packard released a transcript of his statement; here is some of what he said:

"All of us, Mr. President, whether we're in politics or not, have weaknesses," the senator began. "For some, it's drinking. For others, it's gambling. For still others, it's women. None of these weaknesses applies to you

... your weakness is credibility. This has always been your short suit with the news media and the general public."

According to eyewitnesses, the President took that remark and the equally frank ones that followed with equanimity — obviously concentrating, obviously thinking, serious but neither grave nor piqued.

### CREDIBILITY

Packwood suggested that Watergate had created a two-fold problem for Mr.

Nixon: one with the Congress, the other with the general public.

The President's congressional difficulties, he went on, arose from neglect — he described the congressional Republicans as "never consulted, never heard, never heeded" — and from the firing of Archibald Cox, the special Watergate prosecutor. Most members of Congress, Packwood said, believe, rightly or wrongly, that Mr. Nixon broke his word by that act.

"Congress has come to expect that many people who testify before it lie," the earnest young senator said.

### WORD

"It's an entirely different matter, however, when one person gives his word to another. That is a bond which those of us in politics revere highly. Those who breach that bond suffer an incalculable loss of credibility." Eridging the congressional chasm, Packwood argued, would be relatively easy.

Simple communication, he said, together with a bit of political ego massage, would correct much of the difficulty.

In an unusually candid remark, he told the President

that "most of us will succumb to attention" — the old slap on the back.

"The problem with the public," Packwood said, "is that they no longer believe you. They no longer trust the integrity of the administration."

### CRIME

The senator then seized upon a remark the President had made earlier to Senator Robert Stafford of Vermont. Mr. Nixon had told the New Englander that he would most certainly not resign when he had not even been convicted of a crime.

"For too long," said Packwood, "this administration has given the public the impression that its standard of conduct was not that it must be above suspicion but that it must merely be above criminal guilt. Mr. President, that is not an adequate standard or conduct for those who have been accorded the privilege of governing this country."

As an example, the senator cited the indictments of former Commerce Secretary

Maurice Stans and former Attorney General John Mitchell. If they are cleared, he predicted, "there will be great trumpeting from this administration that the court system has vindicated them and revived their credibility and inferentially yours."

"If Stans and Mitchell are acquitted," Packwood insisted, "It simply means that there was not presented evidence beyond a reasonable doubt to convince reasonable jurors of their criminal guilt. It does not mean they were innocent of wrongdoing."

### ADVICE

Packwood's advice for dealing with the credibility gap was simple. He recommended two specific steps:

One: Disclose "everything — the tapes, confidential notes — everything" bearing on the scandal. "There can't be a missing tape accidentally disposed of by a janitor. There can't be a memo uncovered by an inquiring reporter."

Two: Hold an open-ended, no-time-limit news conference with only six or seven reporters (Packwood recommended three by name, including Dan Rather of the Columbia Broadcasting System.)

"I recommend this first," the senator said, "because you are good at an adversary proceeding and second, because the public must be convinced that you have opened yourself up to your harshest critics."

### LEAD

In conclusion, Packwood told the President that "Watergate has destroyed your ability to inspire and lead this country" — and would have destroyed Mr. Nixon's ability to govern as well, if the U.S. had a parliamentary system.

He said that he expected neither impeachment nor resignation, so that Mr. Nixon was "left to your own devices to restore your credibility."

When Packwood concluded, Senator William Scott of Virginia, a conservative, urged the President to have some friends on any interview program.

But Mr. Nixon said no; he thought Packwood was right, because "you don't win any games hitting soft balls."

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