

# Gullible Governors

By Tom Wicker

## IN THE NATION

The Republican Governors who met in secret with Richard Nixon at Memphis this week have been had. Just one day after they said he assured them personally that the existing seven subpoenaed tapes of White House conversations were audible and complete, the White House counsel disclosed in Federal court that an eighteen-minute segment was missing from one of them.

This confirmed what smart politicians like the Governors ought to have known all along—that they were taking a lot on themselves when they gave the public their glowing assurances that Mr. Nixon would clear up all public doubts about his personal affairs and his conduct in office.

By the Governors' own admission, he in fact gave them little more information than they had had before, and no documentation at all. Yet most said they had been satisfied that Mr. Nixon was telling the truth and Ronald Reagan of California went so far as to say he was "convinced now that all that's needed is to find a means to get the information he gave us before the American public."

So Mr. Nixon's "counter-offensive" may be working, with the aid of Republican House members, Senators and Governors of his own party, as well as his televised appearance before a group of managing editors. Nevertheless, this is a counter-offensive and not a defense.

Gov. Winfield Dunn of Tennessee quoted Mr. Nixon as having told the Governors, "They've asked me to walk away when my popularity drops below 40 per cent. What a tragedy it would be to let that be the indicator that it's time to give up the game." Of course it would be, and Mr. Nixon is quite right not to "walk away" for that reason.

On the other hand, if his counter-offensive manages to drive his Gallup and Harris ratings above 40 per cent again, that is no reason whatever to conclude that the so-called Watergate matter has been dealt with, that no one need concern himself further, that the problem is "behind us." Nevertheless, Mr. Nixon's counter-offensive obviously is designed to restore his popularity rating—not to answer the myriad questions that remain about Watergate, the plumbers, his finances, and his Administration's relationships with big contributors and big interests.

Mr. Nixon continued to insist to the Governors, for one example, that there is a "difference of recollection" between him and Elliot Richardson on the details of how Archibald Cox came to be fired. Mr. Richardson's "recollection," however, happens to have been given under oath and in public; Mr.

Nixon's account has been given in secrecy and without an oath and in elusive phrases. The effect is to leave at least a Nixonian suggestion of perjury by Mr. Richardson. The counter-offensive, so far, has created and furthered, rather than resolved, this question.

For another example, Mr. Nixon insisted to the Governors as he had to members of Congress last week that he would soon release the controversial White House tapes to the public. But why does he not just release them, rather than talk about releasing them?

Judge Sirica has said specifically that if Mr. Nixon "thinks it advisable to waive any privilege and make tapes or other material public, he of course is free to do so at any time." Mr. Nixon told the Governors the taped conversations were fully audible, and he told the managing editors he was anxious to get this evidence to the public. What's stopping him? The White House can turn out transcripts of a Nixon speech within minutes after he makes it; what is so difficult about getting out transcripts of these tapes?

But, as the latest news of missing tape suggests, there are just too many questions remaining to catalogue them in a short space. Rather than aiding and abetting Mr. Nixon in promising that he will answer all these questions—someday, somehow—members of Congress and state Governors ought to be insisting that he answer them as soon as possible and in any forum.

One interesting possibility did come from the Governors' meeting with Mr. Nixon. Gov. Robert D. Ray of Iowa said it was his impression that Mr. Nixon "now understands that he has to answer these accusations," that they would not go away by themselves. That might mean that Mr. Nixon until recently had not fully grasped the seriousness of his political situation and had believed that his office and constitutional claims could carry him through his legal and political difficulties.

When this notion was put to one familiar with Mr. Nixon's attitudes, he suggested that the problem was more nearly that those around him in the White House had been successful in persuading Mr. Nixon that he was mostly the innocent victim of an onslaught by the press and by liberal opponents determined to "get him."

Either way, the questions are real; and the longer Mr. Nixon lets them go unanswered, no matter how volubly he promises full disclosure in some undefined future, the more the suspicion will be confirmed that he cannot answer them.