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**GOP in South
Backs Nixon,
Flees Scandal**

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ATLANTA — Southern Republicans and three of the party's most prominent national spokesmen spent the weekend trying to put the greatest possible distance between the GOP and the Watergate scandal while at the same time strongly defending President Nixon.

The 1,200 delegates to the Southern Republican Conference applauded every mention of Mr. Nixon's name and recurrently criticized such favorite targets as Sen. Edward M. Kennedy, George Meany, Ralph Nader and The Washington Post. But they also laughed and clapped when Rep. Lamar Baker of Tennessee repeated a joke he said was popular in the House cloakroom:

"What we've got to do is get crime out of the White House and back into the streets where it belongs."

This attempt to reconcile a Nixon defense with Repub-

See **GOP, A8, Col. 1**

GOP, From A1

lican Party independence pervaded every speech at the conference. Former Texas Gov. John Connally received a standing ovation when he praised "the maligned President" for his foreign and domestic accomplishments and said he would today defeat George McGovern by nearly as great a margin as he did in 1972.

But Connally conceded that Mr. Nixon has made "some mistakes" about Watergate, and he said that other Republicans shouldn't be blamed for them.

"... Are the American people so blind or so simple that they're going to hold against a candidate for state representative or governor ... something that a few individuals did in Washington?" Connally asked. "Don't believe that. The American people are not prepared for class indictments. We went through that in the McCarthy days."

Similarly, New York Gov. Nelson A. Rockefeller said that "the Watergate tragedy is a tragedy of individuals — not of the Republican Party."

Rockefeller brusquely turned aside a variety of questions about Mr. Nixon's credibility on the Watergate tapes. But when Rockefeller was asked whether Mr. Nixon was one of the individuals he had in mind, he replied: "That's right, it's a problem for him."

And in response to another question about the President, Rockefeller said, "He has this Operation Candor and it isn't quite finished yet." When would it be finished? "The sooner the better with me," said Rockefeller.

Even California Gov. Ronald Reagan, who was the most supportive of Mr. Nixon among the three prospective 1976 GOP presidential candidates who spoke here and who was by far the best received speaker at the conference, referred to the "pall of Watergate" and the "illegal and immoral acts"

that have been committed. A few months ago Reagan was saying that White House officials involved in the scandal weren't "criminals at heart."

Both the renewed support for Mr. Nixon and the continuing reservations about Watergate were reflected in a speech by Republican National Chairman George Bush, who predicted that the President would neither resign nor be impeached.

"If the administration moves forward on the energy crisis as it is doing, if the people realize that the dire predictions of economic disaster are not valid ... if the factual disclosures promised by the President on Watergate help lay to rest the speculation on Watergate-related issues as I feel confident they can do, and, let's face it, if there are no more horrendous shocks ... then the people will tell the members of Congress, let the man do the job he was elected to do," Bush said.

The GOP chairman, a former Texas congressman who is popular in the South, stresses his conclusions when speaking before Republican audiences. Off the stump, he gives equal weight to the conditions he mentions.

Privately, GOP officials in the South unhesitatingly concede that Watergate has delayed the steady progress neither resign nor be impeached although many of these same officials say that the Watergate effect will be negligible in state elections.

L. E. (Tommy) Thomas, the respected Florida state chairman, organized re-registration drives in the South after Mr. Nixon's re-election victory where Democratic of political realignment, although they were joining the Republican Party. Now, says Thomas, Republicans are holding their own in registration but doing no more than that.

"There's no question that Watergate killed the re-registration effort," Thomas says.

Recently elected Virginia Gov. Mills Godwin, a Democrat-turned-Republican, said that hundreds of thousands of former Southern Democrats now occupy a "no-man's-land" between the two political parties.

"The events of this year may have slowed the migration, but I do not see in my own state that they can go back to the party from which they've come," Godwin said.

John Savage is a 39-year-old Georgia state legislator and a dentist who relocated from a wealthy Atlanta suburb to a poor, rundown section of the city. He is one of the few white Republicans in the Deep South to be elected to state office with a substantial proportion (30 per cent) of black votes.

Savage, who is seeking the lieutenant governorship, recalls that when he appeared before a black audience, one woman remembered him as the person who had spoken to "those Watergate ladies," meaning a gathering of Republican women.

Despite such indications of Watergate influence, there was a shared belief among Republican politicians at the conference that the party will continue to make gains in the South in next year's election.

The South gave Mr. Nixon 70 per cent of its vote in 1972, and every national poll has shown that the President retains stronger support here than in other regions of the country.

Southern GOP strategists talk of adding four to eight House seats to the 37 they now hold. They say that only one seat now held by a Republican, the Louisiana seat of freshman Rep. David Treen, is in jeopardy.

North Carolina Gov. James Holshouser, whose own polls precisely forecast his upset victory in 1972, says that present GOP private polls show that Republicans have a real possibility of ousting Senate Watergate Committee Chairman Sam Ervin if Ervin seeks re-election next year. Republicans talk of an outside chance of defeating South Carolina Sen. Ernest Hollings, particularly if Gen. William Westmoreland decides to seek election as a Republican.

On the other hand, Florida Republicans are frankly worried about the fate of Sen. Edward Gurney, whose name has been linked to influence-peddling allegations. If anything happens to Gurney, they foresee a free-for-all GOP primary that could lead to a Democratic victory.

Kentucky Republicans are concerned that they may lose the seat held by Sen. Marlow Cook if Cook does not seek re-election.