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**Democrats, Too, Afraid
Of Watergate Backlash**

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WASHINGTON, Dec. 18 — Democratic officials preparing for Congressional elections of 1974 are fearful that if the Republican elephant stumbles over Watergate, it may fall on top of some Democrats.

Despite widespread Republican dread that the Watergate scandal and a troubled economy represent potential disaster for President Nixon's part next year — and general Democratic glee over that prospect — Democratic strategists are far from sanguine.

"Watergate," said one of several key Democratic professionals interviewed in the last few days, "has done for domestic politics what the atom bomb did for international diplomacy: All the rules, all the premises, are changed."

Senator Lloyd Bentsen of Texas, the chairman of the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee, forecast the addition of at least three seats to the party's 57-member Senate majority. Representative Wayne L. Hays of Ohio, the

chairman of the Democratic National Congressional Committee said that he was "shooting for" a net gain of 40 House seats now held by the Republican minority.

And Robert J. Keefe, executive director of the Democratic National Committee, said that the party hoped to gain a two-thirds majority in both houses to "allow Democrats to override vetoes and put a check on this President."

Beneath such optimistic outlooks, however, is a nagging

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concern among Democratic professionals over the "incumbency factor" — the extent to which voters may react to Washington scandal and economic difficulty by taling it out on incumbent members of Congress.

"I don't think Watergate is to any incumbent's advantage," said Mark Shields, a campaign consultant whose clients tend to be liberal Democrats. "Virginity is going to be a terribly prized political quality."

Mr. Hays said that he also foresaw a backlash against incumbent office holders, but for a different reason.

"My judgment is that Watergate may very well not have as much impact as people think, certainly not as much as it would if the election was this year," he said.

"But if gas rationing is put into effect, the average fellow is going to be so mad, he'll vote against whoever's in office, and we've got more in than they have."

Some Officials Disagree

Democrats are not much given to universal political views, and some campaign officials disagreed. Senator Bentsen, for one, predicted that while "the question of integrity will be one of major impact" in 1974, it posed the greatest risk to Republicans, because "we aren't having people resigning [under fire] or being indicted."

Mr. Bentsen said that Democrats did not have to raise the Watergate issue to benefit from it, since "it's all hanging out there for the public to see."

Then, too, Democrats, like

football coaches psyching up their team before the big game, sometimes tend to belittle their prospects. But experienced campaign tacticians like Mr. Keefe appear to be genuinely concerned about a possible reaction against incumbents.

"It's a concept nobody has been able to test yet," he said. "I haven't been satisfied with any research I've seen in this area. But it is something we have to be leery of, at least."

Another Democratic campaign official, who asked not to be identified, said that he was "anticipating an incumbency problem and advising

members of Congress to make sure the No. 1 item on their campaign expenditures was travel — and I don't mean for junkets, but for trips back home to their districts."

Even though Watergate may be politically advantageous for Democrats, the official said, "I'm not hanging my hat on it by any means."

'An Alien Force'

In Mr. Shields's view, Democrats have an edge over Republicans because of the Nixon Administration's legal and economic problems. But he added:

"The polls show that government is more and more being viewed as an alien force. Anyone who has the narrow perspective that it's going to be enough to put distance between himself and the President — you know, pull out his 1956 statement against Richard Nixon — is kidding himself."

Mr. Shields said that he could foresee incumbents being upset by political unknowns "by a guy with three photogenic kids saying 'Look, I've never voted before, isn't it time we had a Senator, too?'"

Mr. Keefe said that the best course for Democrats was to avoid trying to take advantage, overtly, of Watergate and to concentrate instead on more customary issues.

"Republicans have booted away their strongest issues," he contended. "This is not going to be a year they can demagogue about, law and order, or about Democrats being responsible for inflation or about business doing better under Republicans. This time, Republicans are going to have to run on the kind of issues we are better equipped in the pub-

lic's mind to deal with, the bread-and-butter issues."

Another factor that could upset the Democratic strategy is President Nixon's future in office.

A consultant to Democrats seeking re-election to the House said that his clients would "just as soon the President stay in office" to dramatize the Watergate issue.

Similarly, Mr. Keefe said that if President Nixon were to resign, "we'd be a little nervous about circumstances," with Vice President Ford moving into the White House.