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How Long for Nixon?

By William V. Shannon

WASHINGTON, Dec. 26—In mid-August it was my belief that "what we are witnessing in the Watergate drama is the slow, agonizing fall from power of an Administration. . . . Mr. Nixon's resignation may not be inevitable but it is inherently logical and grows slightly more probable with each passing week."

As the year draws to a close, the prediction of August has become the settled expectation of December. More and more people are convinced that Mr. Nixon's resignation is only a matter of time. Indeed, after all the scandals, court battles, firings and resignations of the last several months, there is some astonishment that Mr. Nixon is still in the White House, still pretending to be in command of the nation's affairs as if the energy shortage or the Middle East were his primary concern and Watergate a half-forgotten mosquito bite.

In clinging to the husks of power, Mr. Nixon relies upon political strengths more substantial than the pusillanimity and ineptitude of the Democrats in Congress. They are the same three strengths that he deployed to accomplish his political comeback in 1968: The tolerance of the business and financial community, the support of middle-of-the-road and conservative Republicans, and his discreet identification with racism, a racism that originated in the South and is still most potent there but that has spread through much of the North.

But these assets are not what they once were for Mr. Nixon. He can no longer count on his hard-core supporters to save him.

As an individual, Mr. Nixon has never been a hero in the boardrooms of Wall Street or the executive suites of businesses across the country. But most businessmen, looking at politics from the vantage point of their own interests, have regarded him as safe.

In the White House he has done little to disturb powerful business forces. On taxes, antitrust, minimum wages, fuel oil import quotas, appointments to regulatory commissions and now in the energy shortage, the President's attitudes faithfully reflect the conventional wisdom of the business community.

Those attitudes have political consequences in the Watergate crisis. Because of them and because the economy is still booming, there is no outcry from the business community demanding the President's resignation. Since the G.O.P. is a party with close ties to industry and finance, this pas-

sivity is reflected in the cautious line taken by most Republicans in the House and Senate.

But the President cannot rely on the sheltering tolerance of the business community. If there is one thing businessmen hate, it is uncertainty. They want to be able to plan. The evident disorder of the Nixon Administration and the confusing signals coming out of Washington about future policy are disturbing to businessmen. If their voices are not raised calling for Mr. Nixon's ouster, neither will they be raised to save him. Once the election-frightened politicians in the Republican party decide that he must go, business will write him off like a bad debt.

The President's remaining bulwark is his Southern support in both parties. The unreconstructed white supremacists have not had a more dependable President than Mr. Nixon for many decades. "Law and order," welfare, busing, Supreme Court appointments—at every turn in the road for more than five years Mr. Nixon has skillfully outbid George C. Wallace.

He has denied significant appointments to Negroes, tried to sabotage the Voting Rights Act, ignored the recommendations of the Civil Rights Commission, tried to slow down the pace of integration and worked closely with old-line racist politicians such as Senators Strom Thurmond and James Eastland.

Those facts filter down from Washington and show up in his relatively favorable ratings in Southern public opinion polls. It is no accident that the South is Mr. Nixon's strongest region or that it was there that he took his "Operation Candor" on the road. In these last desperate weeks, it is to Southerners in Congress he has turned for help, to Senator Stennis of Mississippi on his disputed tapes and to Representative Mills of Arkansas on his disputed taxes.

In the head-counting on a possible impeachment move in the House, the forty or more pro-Administration Southern Democrats are the President's ace. In the Senate, a dozen Republicans might vote to impeach the President but if Democrats like Eastland, Stennis, McClellan and Byrd of Virginia stayed with him, they could produce the one-third plus one vote needed to save him. But the Southern Democrats can make the difference only if his own conservative Republicans stay with him, and their support steadily weakens.

We are into Act V of this historic drama. The end cannot be many weeks away.