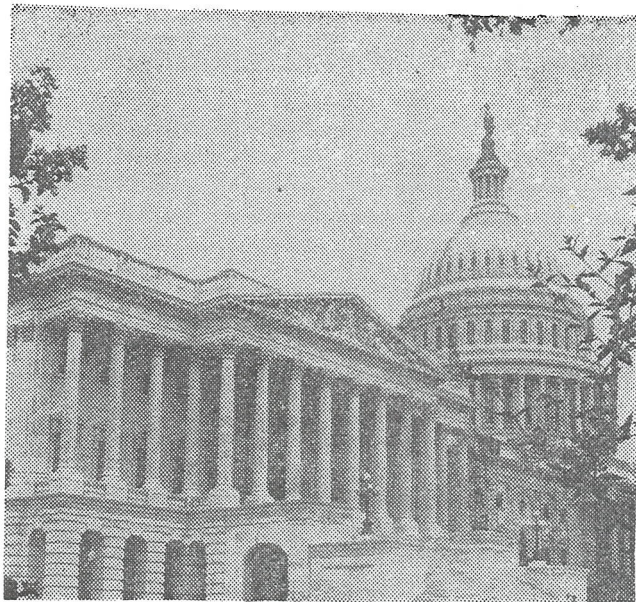


IT IS easy, too easy, to see Watergate as the main reason why an unusually large number of House Republicans—15 at latest count—have announced their intention to retire at the end of the year. Surely the scandals have had an impact both on the voters and on the congressmen themselves. Rep. Howard Robison (R-N.Y.), for one, said that “my personal frustration” over Watergate “is about even with my fatigue.” In many cases, though, the major impetus seems to have come from more traditional considerations such as redistricting or age. (Minority Whip Leslie C. Arends of Illinois is 78; Rep. Ancher Nelsen of Minnesota is 69; Rep. H. R. Gross of Iowa is 74). And 11-term Rep. Charles S. Gubser (R-Calif.) may have summarized the view of many House veterans when he remarked, “It isn’t as much fun as it used to be.”

Indeed, the House has changed substantially since most of the retiring members were first sworn in. Being a legislator is “less fun” in the obvious ways: Junkets are fewer, there is less time off, and members must be somewhat more scrupulous about their activities because their conduct is more carefully watched by a bevy of new citizens’ groups. The volume, complexity and pace of congressional work have grown: Last year the House conducted 726 roll calls, an all-time record, and the new electronic voting system gives members only 15 minutes to get to the floor. The House may also be less pleasant, in the view of veterans, because it has gradually grown less clubby and genteel. Minority Leader John J. Rhodes suggested the other day that polarization and antagonism along both party and ideological lines have been increasing in the House for several years. “It’s not congenial,” he said.

Especially for Republicans, seniority now offers few rewards. A GOP takeover of the House now seems so distant that ranking Republicans have little chance to become committee chairmen—and seven ranking Republicans have already decided to retire. Even within the party’s ranks, longevity means much less than it used to, for committees function more democratically and junior members are less patient and deferential than in days



*The House wing of the U.S. Capitol.*

of yore. The Executive Branch is less attentive, too. All in all, the most important benefit of long seniority may be the large pension which a member can collect after he steps aside.

It all adds up to a gradual change of generations, a time of transition in the style and atmosphere and mode of operations in the House. Turnover in the ranks is very timely, however much some of the individuals who are retiring will be missed. In many cases, Watergate undoubtedly contributed to the decision not to undertake yet another campaign. But even without Watergate, most of the retirees—and many Representatives who do plan to seek re-election—must find something powerfully appealing in the announcement made last week by Rep. Julia Butler Hansen (D-Wash.). After 37 years in public service, Mrs. Hansen said, “When my term expires, I shall return to my home in Cathlamet with my husband to write, garden, do as I please, hang up the telephone or take the damn telephone off the hook.”