

Michigan Aftermath

The shock of Democratic victory in Vice President Ford's old Michigan district could be magnified into total alienation between Richard M. Nixon and his party by the next congressional special election: March 5 in Ohio's First Congressional District, another longtime Republican stronghold.

"If we lose that one," a top Republican told us, "real panic will set in." Such panic could radicalize congressional Republicans on resignation or impeachment.

But even before the crucial Ohio election, Republicans who had muted their deep unease over the impact of Watergate are now preparing harsh new demands on the White House for complete disclosure of all documents demanded by the House Judiciary Committee.

Thus, at the very least, the shocking results of the Michigan election have stiffened and offended the Republican Party at the moment Mr. Nixon and his battery of anti-impeachment lawyers are plotting new ways to withhold material from the House committee's impeachment proceedings.

There are strong indications that the Michigan upset by Democrat Richard VanderVeen was the result of thousands of outright Republican switches, not merely angry and disillusioned Republican voters staying at home.

For example, nearly 30,000 get-out-the-vote calls from Republican telephone banks went to identified Republican voters the day before the election. "We got those voters out," a high-level Michigan Republican told us, "but they doublecrossed us and voted Democratic."

In the Republican hard-core counties of Ford's safely Republican district, precinct captains and county chairmen sent this message to state Republican headquarters within hours after the vote: "Nixon has to go."

"These people would have crawled over hot coals for Nixon until Watergate," a political lieutenant of Republican Gov. William G. Milliken told us. "Now they've had it."

The message of Michigan was only dimly visible here at a mid-January session of the House Congressional Campaign Committee, headed by Rep. Robert Michel of Illinois. Moving from region to region, Michel received heartening reports from regional chairmen that Watergate, after all, was not going to turn into the Republican-eating monster that some Republicans feared.

The only discordant voice raised that day came from Rep. William J. Scherle, a no-nonsense conservative from Iowa. On hearing that Ford's seat was "safe," Scherle vehemently protested. In Iowa, he recounted, a fund-raiser planned for the Second Congressional District last November had to be called off for a fairly decisive reason: Republican leaders simply could not sell near enough tickets to make it worthwhile.

Scherle's warning: anti-Nixon sentiment welling up from the Watergate issue was still quiescent, just under the surface, but would surely burst sooner or later in a torrent of protest votes. Scherle's grim forecast was fulfilled by the Michigan election, in which VanderVeen ignored inflation,

energy and unemployment to concentrate on Watergate and the President.

In Ohio's First District, Democratic prospects are far better on paper than they ever were in Michigan, despite a 70 per cent win there in 1972 by William Keating, the resigned Republican congressman. Operatives of both parties believe Democrat Thomas Luken was running slightly ahead of Republican Willis Gradison Jr., just before the Michigan shocker.

Thus, Luken must be the odds-on choice to capture the seat for the Democrats for the first time in 10 years. But more important, a powerful pro-Luken labor campaign has been quietly transported from Grand Rapids to Cincinnati in the past few days with a most sophisticated AFL-CIO political operation.

It was this operation, under the overall command of top AFL-CIO political operative Al Barkan, that turned out a maximum Democratic vote in Michigan. Some 35,000 telephone calls got voters to the polls, backed by unprecedented batteries of doorbell ringers and plenty of money.

To save the Ohio district—and stem what is surely potentially fateful political bloodletting for President Nixon—the Republican high command is prepared to put every resource available at Gradison's command.

But moving Republicans to the polls March 5 may well mean more votes for the Democrat, as in Michigan. If so, even a last-ditch, maximum Republican campaign with help direct from the White House may only be self-defeating in Cincinnati. Having experienced shock in Michigan, party leaders are now half-expecting panic from Ohio.

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