

Impeachment Prospects

Up to now most of the Congress has tended to regard Watergate as a media event. But criminal indictments, as Dr. Johnson once said about the prospect of hanging, tend to concentrate the mind.

As never before, Republicans now see that association with the Nixon administration is politically disastrous, while Democrats sense an enormous opportunity in taking on the President. Thus the odds on impeachment have shifted dramatically.

Only the seven senators on the special investigating committee headed by Sam Ervin have so far had to come directly to grips with Watergate. For the rest of the Congress, the scandal has been something they saw on television or read about, very unsystematically, in the papers. They and their constituents have focused their attention on such immediate and direct concerns as inflation and energy.

The criminal indictments change that outlook. They constitute a solemn assertion that seven persons intimately associated with President Nixon were engaged in unmistakably criminal activities involving flagrant abuse of power and gross obstruction of justice. Moreover, a train of events is set in motion which cannot go away. There will be arraignments, pleas and public trials with dramatic confrontations of witnesses stretching out for months to come.

So impeachment no longer presents itself to the Congress as a theoretical leap in the dark which all prudent men would hope to avoid. It now shapes up as a practical decision on which they will have to take a stand.

As Republicans examine the prospect, they can see that support for the President means terrible trouble. Not only have they lost recent congres-

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sional elections in Grand Rapids, Mich., and Johnstown, Pa., but there is an intriguing poll of 11 states taken by Barry Goldwater, the conservative senator from Arizona, in November and January. The November poll showed that Democrats and Republicans both suffered in equal measure from Watergate. The January poll showed that the Republicans were down by 10 per cent below the Democrats.

What happened in between? Well, there was “Operation Candor,” in which the President deliberately associated himself with the Republican Party. As a result Republicans closely connected with Mr. Nixon are now taking their distances from him.

John Rhodes, the Republican leader in the House, for example, is pointing out that Mr. Nixon himself said at a congressional breakfast that Republicans would be free to vote their personal interest, rather than the party line, in an impeachment proceeding. John Anderson, the Republican conference leader, says that “the normal bonds of loyalty and allegiance do not hold,” and points out that in the President’s last press conference Mr. Nixon himself made a distinction between his party and his office.

On the Democratic side there is a sudden realization that going hard at

the President can pay big dividends. Perhaps the most interesting evidence lies in a poll of 16 representative districts across the country which is now being cited by Democratic leaders in the House. The poll shows that Watergate has reversed public attitudes on the issues which in the recent past comprised the cardinal Democratic weaknesses.

The Democrats only last year ran behind the Republicans by 2-to-1 when the question of ability to deal with crime was posed. Now they are six points ahead. In the matter of honesty in government, they are 26 points ahead where only a year ago they were 40 points behind.

One result is that the Democratic leadership is beginning to swing much harder on Watergate than in the past. “Now if we call ‘Dial-a-Prayer’ we won’t get Chuck Colson,” House Majority Leader Thomas “Tip” O’Neill said, in a comment expressing the new mood. And Chairman Peter Rodino of the House Judiciary Committee is through playing softball with the White House in the matter of getting evidence for the impeachment inquiry.

Even the Southern Democrats most tightly bound to Mr. Nixon are standing aloof. Thus Joe Waggoner of Northern Louisiana, the Democrat most closely associated with support for the Nixon administration, said in an interview: “I feel very close to the President. But I haven’t said much about impeachment. I’m waiting for the evidence. I don’t want to paint myself into a corner.”

What all this means is that Watergate, for the first time, is now coming before the Congress on the merits of the case. The merits of the case are so overwhelming that the House is going to find it very difficult to avoid voting articles of impeachment.