

Sen. Buckley Urges Nixon To Step Down

By David S. Broder
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Sen. James L. Buckley (Cons.-R-N.Y.) yesterday called on President Nixon to resign. Only that "extraordinary act of statesmanship and courage," he said, can end "the crisis of the regime" that is doing "irrevocable damage to our entire system of government."

In Houston last night, Mr. Nixon rejected the suggestion saying that "while it might be an act of courage to run away from a job that you were elected to do, it also takes courage to stand and fight for what you believe is right."

The formal statement by Buckley, a longtime backer of the President and a leading figure in the conservative movement, drew no support from other congressional Republicans.

But Senate Republican Whip Robert P. Griffin of Michigan said "there is bound to be a profound impact" from this first major breach in the conservative line of defense of the President.

In a statement and press conference before a battery of television cameras in the Senate caucus room, Buckley argued that the "perception of corruption . . . has effectively destroyed the President's ability to speak from a position of moral leadership" and that "the impeachment process cannot possibly resolve the crisis."

While stressing that he was not prejudging the question of Mr. Nixon's innocence or guilt, he said that only a "voluntary" resignation, "a free, positive and magnanimous act," could rescue the country from "the Watergate swamp."

Calling the prospect of a televised Senate trial of the President "a Roman circus," Buckley said "the most sordid dregs dug up by the Watergate miners would inflame the passions of the domestic audience and provoke the guffaws . . . of the outside world."

The New York senator, elected with White House aid over anti-Nixon Republican incumbent Charles E. Goodell in 1970, said he knew Mr. Nixon had repeatedly rejected resig-

nation on grounds it would weaken the presidential office.

"But precisely the opposite is the case," he said. "If future Presidents are to carry out their grave responsibilities in the free and unfettered manner President Nixon desires, they must be able to inherit an office that has not been irrevocably weakened by a long, slow, agonizing inch-by-inch process of attrition."

"As it now stands," Buckley said, "the office of the President is in danger of succumbing to the death of a thousand cuts. The only way to save it is for the current President to resign, leaving the of-

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ice free to defend itself with a new incumbent."

He argued that by turning the office over to Vice President Ford, Mr. Nixon could preserve the mandate of his own election victory and guarantee progress on the program on which he ran.

On the other hand, Buckley warned that if Mr. Nixon remains in office, "we run the risk of a runaway Congress that could commit us to new and dangerous programs from which we may never be able to extricate ourselves."

While this statement was an apparent reference to Republican fears of sweeping Democratic gains in November, Buckley specifically disavowed any political motivation for his remarks.

Buckley conferred with few people outside his own office on the statement—the result of two months of what he called "struggling" with the issue—and informed the President and other senators of his intended action only as a courtesy.

White House officials and other conservative senators

took a tolerant tone in their comments, but Buckley found no immediate seconds for his resignation motion. The only Republican senator previously to urge that course of action on the President was liberal Edward W. Brooke of Massachusetts.

In his televised press conference last night, the President said Buckley's comments "do not cause me to reassess my position."

Rejecting the senator's contention that it would be courageous and statesmanlike to step down, Mr. Nixon argued any such action on his part would "change our system of government" for all time.

"The world needs a strong President," he said, "not one who resigns when the polls go down."

In a brief comment after the President spoke, Buckley said, "Obviously we disagree. I did not expect any overnight agreement. I just hope he takes it into consideration."

Buckley's press secretary, Leonard Saffir, said the first 150 calls to his New York office were predominantly critical, with many of the callers threatening that "I'll never vote for you again."

Nonetheless, several Republican senators said privately that they felt Buckley's statement was a heavy blow to the embattled President.

Bryce Harlow, a presidential counselor, said, "Of course, it's not helpful," but he minimized its political import.

"This is a statement of his own personal judgment—a judgment on the situation and not the man," Harlow said, "I respect Jim Buckley and I know this is not a posturing statement. But I doubt very much there will be a torrent of me-tos from other conservatives. They're all pretty independent."

Harlow's comment was borne out by the initial reaction from Capitol Hill. Sen. Barry Goldwater (R-Ariz.), one of those informed in advance of Buckley's action, said he could "fully understand" the position but disagreed with it.

Goldwater said he questioned "whether the American concept of fair play would not be negated" if a President were forced to resign without impeachment and conviction on formal charges, and simply because he was "philosophically unacceptable to certain politicians and segments of the media."

Another conservative, Sen. Jesse Helms (R-N.C.), said that he would agree with Buckley "if the President is guilty . . . But if Mr. Nixon is innocent, as he claims to be, I feel it would be destructive to the long-range best interests of the country for him to yield to

the rising clamor."

Sen. Bill Brock (R-Tenn.) said that "as of now," he still thought the precedent of a forced resignation and its "damaging effect on the presidency would outweigh the advantage of resolving this crisis."

Griffin said, "I think many senators are troubled by the idea of a President being driven out of office by public opinion without any finding of guilt."

But Griffin added that "I have to concede Senator Buckley has a point, and he's solved in his own mind a dilemma with which the rest of us are still wrestling."

Privately, other Republican senators said the Buckley statement was "a hell of a blow to the White House" and one "that's got to hurt" the President's political situation.

A fellow conservative said he thought Buckley's comment might shock the President into a realization that "conservatives will quit him faster than anyone else if they decide he is covering up."

Until now, most major spokesmen and organs of conservatism have not been actively urging resignation. Jim Roberts, political director of the American Conservative Union, said there is "a widespread difference of opinion" on the resignation issue, with two of its directors, William Rusher and Rep. John Ashbrook (R-Ohio) arguing for it and the others opposed.

Ronald F. Docksai, national chairman of Young Americans for Freedom, said in January that Mr. Nixon should make "full disclosure before Congress . . . or resign."

Sen. Buckley's brother, William F. Buckley Jr., and his National Review magazine argued last November that Mr. Nixon should resign only if he "becomes convinced . . . that he has irretrievably lost the support and trust of a solid majority of the people."

Under those circumstances, the magazine said, resignation would be "his duty."

Human Events magazine, in its current issue, says the crucial question on resignation is "whether Nixon's continuation in office will bring . . . the destruction of the Republican Party and a veto-proof Congress that will control the destiny of this Republic." If Republicans conclude that it will, the magazine said, "they must then do what is necessary."

From the party's liberal flank, Sen. Charles H. Percy of Illinois said yesterday that he still believed "resignation is a personal decision which only Richard Nixon can make," but he said Buckley's statement "obviously makes the situation more perilous" for the President.