

Buckley's Call for Nixon to Resign



William Rusher

WITH HIS somber call on President Nixon to resign for the good of the nation, Senator James L. Buckley of New York becomes the most prominent American conservative yet to take that momentous step.

Senator Buckley took great pains to stress that his statement did not imply that Mr. Nixon was guilty of any wrongdoing whatever for which he should be impeached or removed. Instead, Buckley stressed his reluctant conclusion that America must not be asked to struggle along for nearly three more years under a chief executive so gravely crippled, or (worse yet) be forced to undergo the terrible ordeal of a presidential impeachment and trial by the Senate. By resigning, Buckley suggested, Mr. Nixon could perform one last great, self-abnegating service to his country.

★ ★ ★

WHETHER they agree with Senator Buckley or not, most conservatives will recognize this as a viewpoint a reasonable man might hold. Many conservatives supported Mr. Nixon for the presidential nomination in 1968, feeling that he had the best chance of winning and was near enough to the conservative position on most issues to make the compromise forgivable. Mr. Nixon's subsequent behavior during his first term in the White House, however — his detente with Red China, his imposition of wage and price controls, etc. — alienated huge numbers of conservatives, and only the threat of a McGovern victory kept most of them on the reservation on Election Day 1972.

Thus when the Nixon Administration began to collapse under the impact of the Watergate revelations about a year ago, most conservatives felt little or no sense of personal identification with Mr. Nixon or his problems. Not even the liberals seriously suggested that there was anything characteristically "conservative" about the Watergate affair or the other allegations of wrongdoing.

But once again Mr. Nixon's bacon was saved by his ancient enemies on the left, who called for his impeachment.

★ ★ ★

THE WHOLE AFFAIR has undeniably done grave, perhaps irreparable damage to Mr. Nixon's credibility. Hence, in some degree, it has undermined his ability to govern. Thus Senator Buckley's sorrowful conclusion: Mr. Nixon should resign, to spare the nation further agony and let its essential business proceed.

Other conservative leaders respectfully disagree. Governor Ronald Reagan of California, for one, feels it would be unfortunate if Mr. Nixon quit now, while a formal impeachment inquiry is underway and before the issue of culpability is resolved one way or another. Let the inquiry go forward, Reagan argues; let the chips fall where they may.

If Mr. Nixon is ultimately removed, so be it. If not — if impeachment fails — then that will be the time to decide whether his ability to lead has nevertheless been damaged beyond repair, and whether resignation — with honor, after vindication — would indeed be an act of high statesmanship.