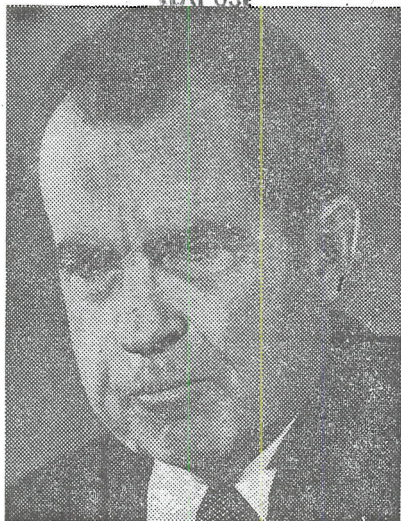


APR 6 1974



Mr. Nixon will campaign . . .

The mind-boggling blunders leading to President Nixon's prospective Michigan campaign trip may cost the Republicans another congressional seat and deepen their gloom, but far more important is this revelation: national Republican leaders have yet to come to terms with the grim realities of Watergate politics.

"This is absolutely lunatic," one astute Michigan Republican told us in describing plans to send Mr. Nixon to northern Michigan's sprawling 8th congressional district which elects a new congressman April 16. That is because the roaring public controversy over Mr. Nixon's visit has riveted him as the central issue of the race—a burden no Republican candidate can welcome.

The blame rests mainly with James Sparling, Republican nominee to succeed James Harvey (who resigned from Congress to become a federal judge). Sparling, Harvey's former administrative assistant, is making his first try for public office.

But the implications extend beyond Michigan. They reveal a party leadership not only insensitive to Mr. Nixon's drag on Republican candidates but apparently more interested in saving the President than saving congressional seats.

These leaders seem oblivious to lessons of earlier special elections: it is decidedly to the advantage of Demo-

cratic candidates to make confidence in Mr. Nixon the central issue. Ironically, in Michigan's 8th District, the Republican campaign had brilliantly distracted attention from the President—until March 22, that is.

Until then, Sparling was disproving the old Washington maxim that administrative assistants make poor congressional candidates. He had State Sen. Robert Traxler, the Democratic nominee, on the defensive for his support of school busing and legislative absenteeism.

But rumors spread of secret Democratic polls showing a huge Traxler lead. Sparling panicked. On March 22, he proposed to Republican State Chairman William McLaughlin a desperate gamble: invite Mr. Nixon to campaign in the district's heavily Republican rural counties. Although McLaughlin pointed out obvious dangers, he agreed to support the candidate's decision.

That same day, Sparling and McLaughlin telephoned Republican National Chairman George Bush to request the President's visit. Word was also relayed to Rep. Bob Michel of Illinois, congressional campaign committee chairman. Astute politicians of wide experience, both Bush and Michel should have immediately warned Sparling of his folly. They did not.

Instead, they seemed delighted to tell the President March 25 that at

least one candidate wanted his help. Some Republican critics have felt Bush places defense of the President above welfare of the party. As for Michel, his steadfast loyalty to Mr. Nixon is admired, but critics feel he reflects a deep-seated Republican failing: over-emphasizing the 25 per cent of the voters true to Mr. Nixon.

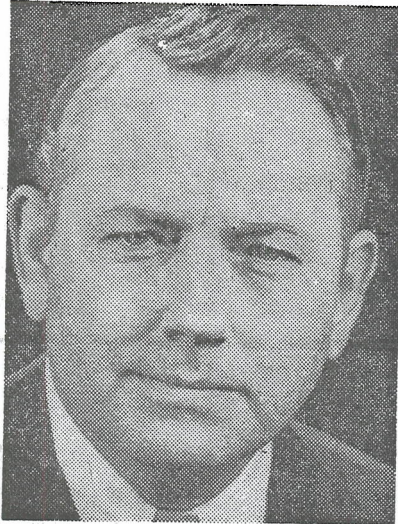
If Bush and Michel were delighted to bear good tidings to the Oval Office, the President was equally delighted to learn he was not Typhoid Mary after all. When it was suggested he defer a decision until a forthcoming Republican poll was available, Mr. Nixon demurred, saying: polls are important, but they're not controlling.

A few days later, that poll, commissioned by the Michigan Republican Party, revealed to Sparling three salient truths: (1) he was less than 8 percentage points behind Traxler, closer than anybody imagined; (2) Mr. Nixon was unbelievably unpopular in the district; (3) Watergate had subsided as a key issue, thanks partly to Sparling's own shrewd campaign. The conclusion: needing no desperate gamble, Sparling should concentrate on Traxler and forget about Mr. Nixon.

But what is obvious is not always easy in the Republican Party. The poll results were revealed to Bush and presidential counselor Dean Burch at last weekend's Midwestern Republican conference. In Chicago, nobody flatly

Rowland Evans and Robert Novak.

The Michigan Test: Can Mr. Nixon Save A GOP House Seat?



... for James Sparling

asked that Mr. Nixon stay home. Thus began a classic case of Republican non-communication.

Sparling broadly hinted to newsmen Monday that he neither needed nor wanted the President but could not bring himself to disinvite him. Nor could Bush or the White House take the obvious hint. The Michigan Republicans referred to the visit as disastrous in conversations with newsmen but said not a word to Bush. Michel, trying to learn whether the candidate did or did not want the President, could not even get Sparling on the telephone.

The incident outraged George Bush, not because a chance to reverse the anti-Republican tide has been undercut but because some news accounts incorrectly accused the White House of promoting the invitation. Bush told us the visit was a case of nothing to lose and everything to gain for the President and Sparling.

He is half right. Mr. Nixon would get the credit for a Sparling win and could scarcely sink lower than he is now if Sparling loses. But making the election a test vote on a President immeasurably burdens Sparling's task. That the party's national leaders do not understand this is more important than the fate of one congressional seat.