

Nixon Woos The Conservatives



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WHITE HOUSE aides have taken pains to remind members of Congress that they are sitting on the impeachment jury and, therefore, that it is improper for them to discuss the case against President Nixon.

It would seem to be even more improper, however, for Mr. Nixon as the defendant to court members of the jury.

Yet he has taken key senators and representatives on dinner cruises down the Potomac. He has made White House planes, limousines and other privileges available to them. He has pampered them with sudden attention.

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THE PRESIDENT is even tailoring his legislative program, at least in part, to appeal to the conservatives whose votes he is counting upon to keep him in office. The politics of impeachment, rather than the merits of the legislation, now seems to determine what bills he will support.

For example, the President had halted the construction of a cross-Florida barge canal to preserve the beauty of northern Florida's Oklawaha river. As recently as six weeks ago, the White House reassured Florida conservationists of the President's support.

But the promises were forgotten after a contingent of conservative congressmen called upon the White House to go ahead with the barge canal. The President hastily withdrew his opposition.

The same thing happened to a federal-land - use bill, which the President has described as his "number one environmental priority" in his State of the Union

message last January. Representative Morris Udall (Dem-Ariz.), working closely with the Interior Department, drew up a bill to accomplish the President's objective.

But conservatives were afraid the bill would allow the federal government, for the sake of the environment, to infringe on private ownership. House Republican leader John Rhodes and Representative Sam Steiger (Rep-Ariz.) arranged a private visit with the President and urged him to abandon the Udall bill.

Although the bill simply codified his own proposals, Mr. Nixon accepted the suggestion of the two powerful conservatives. Steiger helpfully provided a weekend substitute bill, which the President quickly endorsed.

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THIS KILLED the Udall bill. It was a victim, snorted Udall, of "Watergate politics." Agreed a staff member privy to the backstage maneuvering: "This was clearly a case of Nixon trying to shore up his conservative support."

The President has also shifted his stand against other consumer, environmental and social programs, which the conservatives despise.

A White House spokesman denied that the President's environmental shift had anything to do with impeachment politics. The President simply is trying to safeguard the environment and, at the same time, to provide an adequate energy supply, said the spokesman. He claimed that the President accepted the substitute land - use bill "because it was a better bill."