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Joseph Kraft

The GOP: More Talk Than Push

This city is alive with talk of plans and plots to push the President out and the Vice President in. But on examination, all the scenarios for the painless deposition of Mr. Nixon dissolve into mere rumor and speculation. There is, in other words, a good deal less going on than meets the ear.

Everybody's favorite scenario provides that a group of senior Republicans go to the White House and tell the President that for the good of the party, and the office and the country, he has to step down. Sen. Barry Goldwater and former Defense Secretary Melvin Laird are usually cast as the top bananas in that enterprise.

Senator Goldwater, to be sure, was conspicuously forthright in condemning the early phases of the Watergate cover-up. Privately he has indicated to several colleagues his belief that President Nixon is deeply involved.

But the senator's most recent statements—to the effect that Mr. Nixon might resign if impeachment was voted by the House and that Mr. Nixon would himself know when the time was ripe for resignation—bear the marks of a man backing away from responsibility. While Senator Goldwater seems to enjoy being perceived as the man who holds the dagger, he doesn't have the stomach to drive the blade home.

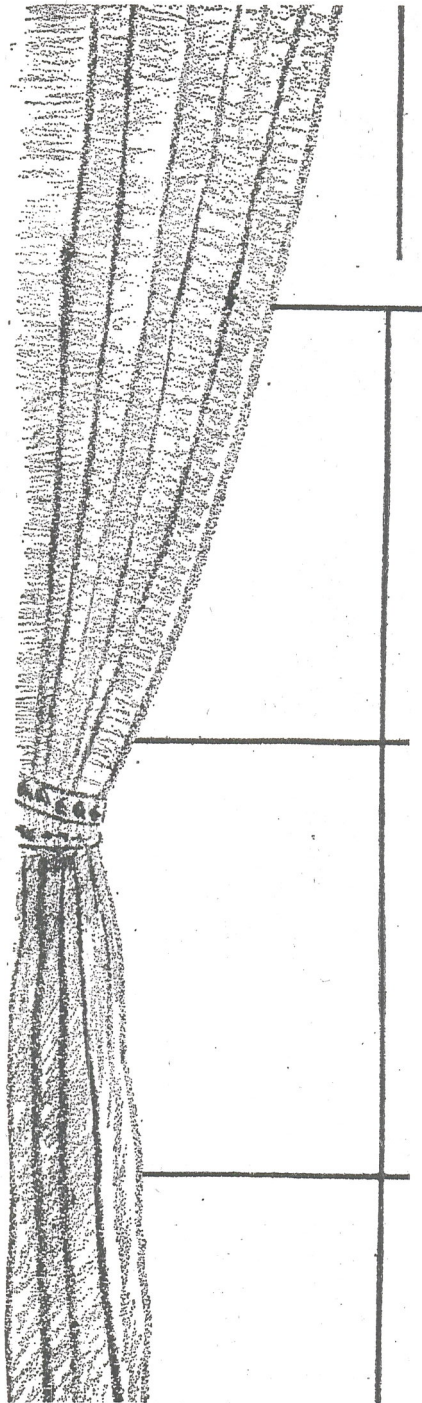
Mr. Laird is probably the leading political strategist in Washington, and he has the widest range of connections in the Republican Party. But he and his friends have been doing fine just by occupying the territory which Mr. Nixon keeps abandoning.

In that way Gerald Ford, a principal Laird intimate, became Vice President. Another Laird intimate, John Rhodes of Arizona, took Ford's place as House Minority Leader. A third friend, former Congressman Robert Ellsworth, is moving into a key position in the Pentagon.

In addition, Mr. Laird and his friends have, of course, taken their distances from Mr. Nixon. Thus Mr. Ford disparaged, the other day, the moral tone evinced in the White House transcripts.

Congressman Rhodes has said that the President might consider resigning, and that the Republican Party would fare better this November if Mr. Ford were at the helm. Mr. Laird himself, even during a stint in the White House, let everybody know that he was critical of the way the President had handled Watergate.

Apart from that opportunistic posture, however, Mr. Laird and his friends are not moving. Nor is the rest of the Republican Party. Indeed it is worth noting that of the Republican senators who have recently roasted Mr. Nixon, Minority Leader Hugh Scott had previously taken a position of support which looked ridiculous, while Schweiker of Pennsylvania, Young of North Dakota and Cook of Kentucky are all up for reelection.

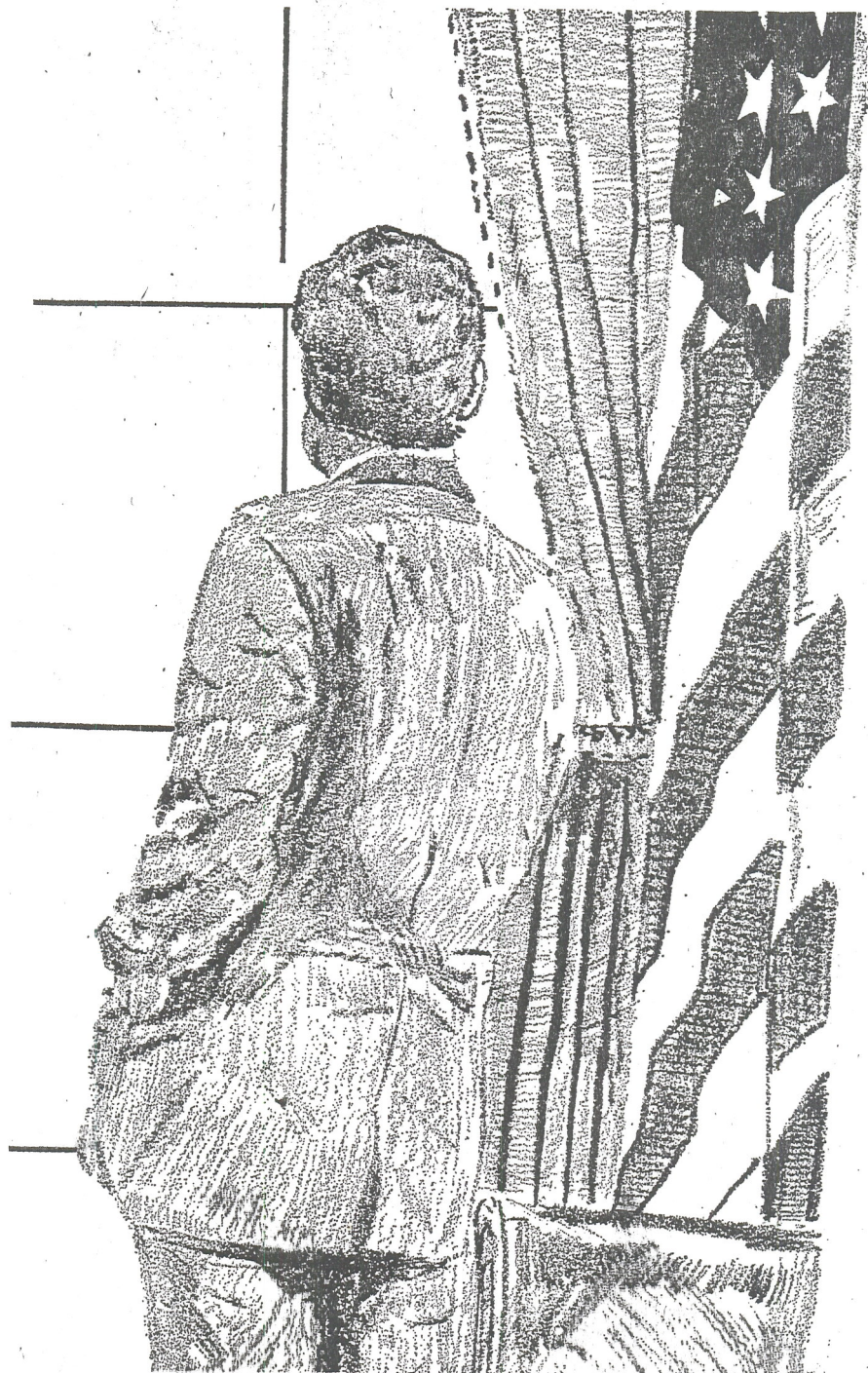


A second set of rumors has the President making a deal to avoid prosecution, and then resigning. But it is virtually unthinkable that federal authorities, whether Democratic or Republican, would prosecute the President once he had resigned. It seems doubtful that state prosecutions, or civil suits against Mr. Nixon, would be upheld. Even if Mr. Nixon needed such protection, it would be very hard, constitutionally, to give him immunity.

The one deal which the President could reasonably cut involves his leading associates. A significant barrier to resignation is that with the President stepping down, former White House

RESIGNATION

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By Peter Mikelbank

aides and Cabinet members might feel free to tell what they know.

Thus Mr. Nixon, before resigning, might want to take all the responsibility upon his own shoulders, and arrange with Special Watergate Prosecutor, Leon Jaworski, for the dropping of charges against former White House aides H. R. Haldeman and John Ehrlichman. That would provide an honorable way for Mr. Nixon to go. It would also assure that the men who could tell all about every detail of Watergate would have a continuing incentive not to talk.

But even such a deal raises big problems. Can the Special Prosecutor legit-

imately quash cases which are set for jury trial? What about the impact on those who have already pleaded guilty, or even served time, on Watergate offenses?

In any case, no steps have been taken along these lines by anybody in authority. Indeed, judging by the release of the transcripts, Mr. Nixon doesn't care what happens to those who served him in the past. He, and the self-promoters who now surround him in the White House, are prepared to put the country through the agonies of an impeachment process. Despite all the talk, nobody has yet figured out how to manage a softer landing.