

SFChronicle
Threats and Pecan Pie

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White House Turns It On

By Robert Shogan
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As the sun settled behind the Virginia hills, six Southern Democratic congressmen and their wives dined on lobster and pecan pie aboard the presidential yacht Sequoia.

The three White House lobbyists who hosted the cruise Monday night never mentioned impeachment. "It was strictly a soft sell," said one of the Democratic guests.

Not so soft was the warning from a White House supporter in the House, passed porter in the House, passed on by an intermediary last week to Representative John Anderson of Illinois, the highly independent chairman of the House Republican Conference.

"I was told that I would be extinguished as a force in the House leadership, if I voted for impeachment," Anderson said.

The two episodes illustrate the carrot and stick tactics used by the White House and its congressional partisans to bolster President Nixon's defenses as the impeachment battle nears a climax on Capitol Hill.

The Nixon administration has never had a large reservoir of good will on Capitol Hill, even among Republicans, and congressmen are skittish about even the appearance of pressure on the issue of impeachment.

Representative Robert H. Michel of Illinois, chairman of the GOP House Campaign Committee, said he was advised White House political counselor Dean Burch:

"Don't gum it up with any heavy-handed kind of thing, which the members have got to make up their own minds."

Nevertheless, by some accounts, the President's backers haven't always worn velvet gloves. According to one Republican source on Capitol Hill, "the President's people" have told some GOP congressmen:

"You may lose this year whatever you do on impeachment. But if you take the President with you, you'll have no future in the Republican party."

One Republican campaign official questioned how seriously such threats should be taken. "I don't know what the White House people are in a position to decide the future of the Republican party," he said.

Anderson, who in May called for Mr. Nixon's resignation, said he did take seriously the warning about his future in the FOP GOP House hierarchy. But he said it would not affect his decision on impeachment, which he will announce after the Judiciary Committee reports.

As for the blandishments extended by the White House, their effectiveness is dubious, too. Republican Representative Lawrence Coughlin of Pennsylvania called a press conference last week to disclose that he had been the object of White House kidnesses, including an invitation to dinner aboard the Sequoia.

Doughlin said he didn't want to impugn the White House's motives. But, he added: "I think it inappropriate to accept such invitations during the impeachment investigation."

Another Republican congressman, Robin Beard of Tennessee, who like Coughlin is as yet uncommitted on

impeachment, disclosed yesterday that he also had turned down a recent invitation for a Sequoia cruise.

Beard, who said he views his role as that of an impartial grand juror, said: "I don't think a defendant in a regular grand jury investigation would invite the jurors over for lunch."

A White House aide said the Sequoia cruises are designed "to give people who deal with each other in a tense situation the opportunity to relax." But he said, "I'd be less than honest if I didn't say it was directed to the congressional situation as it now exists."

The White House official claimed the Sequoia cruises "were something we've done all along." But he conceded that there had probably been more cruises in recent weeks, an increase which he attributed to the President's absence from Washington.

Until recently, the Nixon White House had not been known for extending social favors to congressmen.

"This administration hasn't totally ignored them," said one veteran GOP campaign official "but they hadn't done as much as other administrations have done." Said a former White House aide: "They're trying to be friendly, now that it's too late."

If there had been more occasions for informal give and take with the White House, Michel said: "Some of us would have had better opportunities for input several years ago. It could have made a difference in a lot of things."