

The Agony Of the GOP

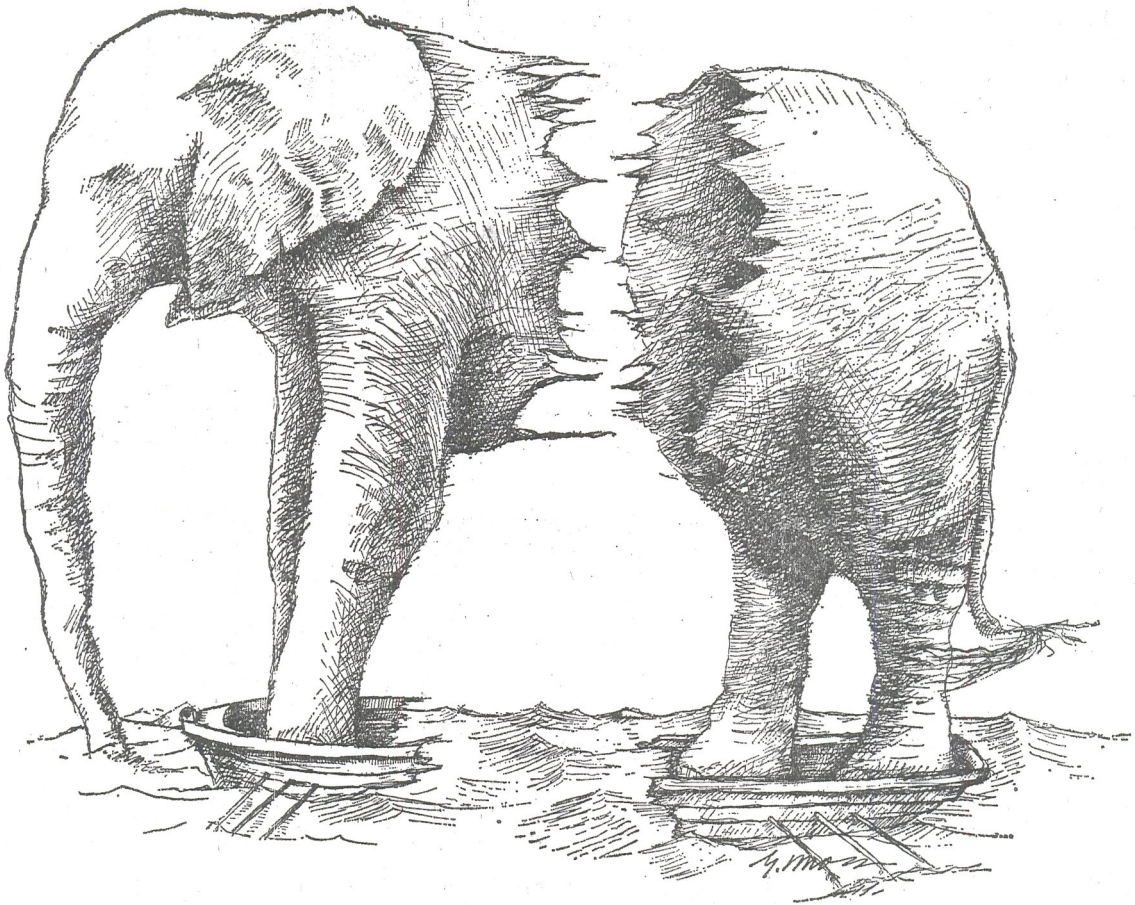
Deepening Republican malaise as the impeachment of President Nixon impends in the House transformed a private strategy session by conservative Republican congressmen into an angry recital of complaints against both the White House and their own leaders.

The rebellion came not from anti-Nixon mugwumps but from the President's loyalist hardcore: the conservative Republican House faction headed by Rep. Sam Devine of Ohio and now known as "The Good Guys." Meeting for dinner Tuesday night, July 23, at the Marriott Twin Bridges Motel in neighboring Alexandria, Va., The Good Guys turned against presidential counselor Dean Burch and—with much greater intensity—the highly respected House Republican leader, Rep. John Rhodes of Arizona.

Thus, seemingly monolithic support for Mr. Nixon by conservative Republicans is evaporating with the plunge in the President's prospects. There now are far fewer pro-Nixon enthusiasts and a growing body of potential pro-impeachment votes among The Good Guys. What this portends for the House impeachment vote and the Senate trial beyond it menaces Mr. Nixon's chances for survival.

The intended feature of Tuesday night's dinner was a panel discussion, featuring Minority Leader Rhodes and counselor Burch, on the 1974 election. But many members really expected a pep rally for the President.

The timing was inauspicious. Shortly before their dinner, the conservatives had been stunned when one of their own—Rep. Lawrence Hogan of Maryland—declared himself for impeachment. They had just been outraged by news that President Nixon was reneging on his pledge to veto a bill providing legal services for the poor, a major symbol for the right, and now planned to sign the bill. These aggravations were intensified by generous applications of alcohol before dinner.



By Geoffrey Moss

That cocktail hour included much grumbling. Some Good Guys complained Rhodes had not been steadfast enough in defending the President. But many more conservatives grouched that Rhodes, travelling the country to raise congressional campaign funds, is not around the House enough.

Thus, when the panel discussion began, Rhodes was subjected to rough questioning by liquor-emboldened colleagues. "In all my years," one amazed conservative told us, "I've never quite seen anything so wild." Rhodes, his face flushed, responded in kind with barbed comments that did not improve the climate.

When one colleague chided Rhodes for not answering Speaker Carl Albert's House speech attacking the Nixon administration's economic policy, the minority leader snapped back that the questioner could do it himself. When another colleague asked about plans for fighting impeachment, Rhodes retorted that the questioner was himself not committed against impeachment.

Burch was not immune from conservative wrath. How could Burch justify Mr. Nixon's breaking his promise to veto the legal services bill? The answer was unclear but also unsatisfying. Some congressmen understood Burch to say that he wanted a veto and Gen. Alexander Haig, White House Chief of Staff, did not and that Haig won out.

That attitude has outraged ideological conservatives such as Howard Phillips, Mr. Nixon's former poverty director and a crusader against the legal services program. Contending Mr. Nixon has abandoned conservative principles out of expediency, Phillips will soon publicly endorse impeachment and may organize a conservative pro-impeachment committee.

This danger to the President was underlined by the presence among the House members at Twin Bridges Tuesday night of one very conservative Republican U.S. senator: James McClure of Idaho. Burch's unsatisfactory answers may be why McClure, until then considered a hardcore anti-impeachment vote in the Senate, the next

day publicly warned that consistent betrayal of conservatives by Mr. Nixon will lead to their demands for his resignation.

But McClure was wavering on non-ideological grounds a week earlier at a luncheon meeting of conservative senators. As New York economist Eliot Janeway explained to them the dangers of a money crisis with a besieged President in office, such erstwhile loyalists as McClure were obviously reexamining their hardcore position.

The hardcore is turning against Mr. Nixon less on questions of impeachment than in reaction to ideological apostasy and economic incompetence. But Tuesday night's assault against so able and popular a leader as John Rhodes indicates Republican congressmen might be reverting to their reputation of a decade ago as the Arabs of Capitol Hill, tending to depose their leaders in lightning coups. As Mr. Nixon's position degenerates, they may be seeking scapegoats.

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