

Impeach Moves to Stall Reforms

By Bruce F. Freed
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Ironically, impeachment proceedings in Congress almost certainly will prevent consideration of legislation designed to prevent future Watergate-type scandals, at least for this year.

Both Senate staff aides and members of the Senate Watergate committee agree that the expected House impeachment and Senate trial of President Nixon will make it impossible for Congress to act on the committee's proposals to avert abuses.

And some Capitol Hill observers predict that any resolution of the impeachment crisis could blunt public support for the panel's 35 specific recommendations.

But the committee's chairman, Democrat Sam J. Ervin Jr. of North Carolina, and its junior member, Republican

Lowell P. Weicker Jr. of Connecticut, remain undaunted by the pessimistic predictions. They expect "a great number" of the committee's proposals to pass, though they agree it won't be this year.

Scattered through the committee's report, the recommendations range from curbing the President's authority to bringing federal agencies under closer congressional scrutiny and establishing a permanent special prosecutor. The document outlined the committee's findings of its 18-month investigation of Nixon administration scandals.

Other recommendations include establishing a federal election commission, limiting campaign contributions and spending, prohibiting foreign contributions and cash contributions of over \$100 and requiring annual financial disclosure by the President and

Vice President to the General Accounting Office.

But impeachment makes consideration almost impossible. Many of the panel's recommendations, including the one to establish a permanent special prosecutor, would have to be considered by the House and Senate Judiciary committees. The House committee has been preoccupied with the impeachment inquiry. If the President is impeached, the Senate trial is expected to stymie all but routine legislation.

Ervin fears that impeachment could dampen the impetus for passage of committee proposals. "Should impeachment happen, it would make it more difficult to get the committee's recommendations enacted," he said. "It would relieve pressure for the reforms."

But one Senate Republican staff member said that if the

President is impeached and convicted, "you would get a flood of more information on Watergate from the White House. They would no longer be able to keep the lid on the way they did in the past, and I think that would give the committee's recommendations new momentum."

On the other hand, if the President escapes impeachment and conviction, "you can say bye-bye to most of these recommendations, especially the public attorney," another Senate aide warned.

Weicker is not worried that waiting will hurt their chances of passage. This is "too important an issue," he said.

"As much as we'll miss Sen. Ervin," who is retiring from the Senate this year, he said, the push will still be on for the recommendations. "I cer-

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tainly will be pushing for them."

Senate staffers and Watergate committee members said in an informal Congressional Quarterly survey that these proposals have the best chance of passage: Annual financial disclosure by the President and Vice President, tighter federal campaign laws and establishment of a joint congressional committee to oversee the intelligence and law enforcement agencies.

The Senate passed in April a tough campaign finance reform bill that includes reforms close to the committee's recommendations, such as an independent federal election commission, contribution and spending ceilings and limits on cash contributions. The House Administration Committee reported out a campaign reform bill in late July that also put ceilings on contributions and expenditures, barred foreign contributions and limited cash contributions. However, it did not include an independent federal election commission.

The proposal for a special prosecutor reportedly has only a slight chance of passage. "The Senate is a little bit leery of this," said an aide to a senior Democratic senator. "There's concern about institutionalizing too many special agencies like the special prosecutor. I don't think it would stand the test of debate."

Ervin said he expected a "pretty close" vote on whether to create a permanent special prosecutor. "A lot of people think that Watergate is a passing aberration," he commented.

Weicker has proposed that the Attorney General be elected. He thinks that a national debate will develop on the whole issue of whether there should be a permanent special prosecutor, a presidentially appointed Attorney General or an elected Attorney General.