

Party Chiefs Find Pardon Impact Slight

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Republican and Democratic politicians, sharply split on the merits of President Ford's unconditional pardon of former President Nixon, generally agreed yesterday that the impact of the decision on November's elections is likely to be modest.

Democratic National Chairman Robert S. Strauss, at the Southern Governors' Conference in Austin, Tex., said that Mr. Ford "didn't cut his throat, but he slashed his political wrists" with his unexpected action.

But Strauss said he would not recommend to Democratic candidates that they make a campaign issue of the pardon. They will be better served, he said, by focusing on the "gut issue" of the economy.

And Gov. Jimmy Carter (D-Ga.), head of the party's 1974 campaign committee, said at the Texas conference that the pardon would have "very little effect" on the November elections.

Mary Louise Smith, designated last week to be the new Republican National Chairman, agreed.

"I think the effects on the November elections will be minimal," she said. "Anything that puts Watergate further behind us is good for the country." Mrs. Smith said she thought that if the pardon "halts a projected period of debate, the action will have a healing effect on the country."

Clarke Reed, Republican state chairman in Mississippi and chairman of the Southern State Chairmen's Association, said the President's decision "is a plus around here" but should not affect the fall results much. Former President Nixon remains strong in the Deep South, he said, and Mr. Ford helped himself there with the pardon.

Robert S. Vance, Democratic state chairman in Alabama and head of the Association of Democratic State Chairmen, said Mr. Ford did not help himself or his party with Southern Democrats, "although this is about as strong a pro-Nixon area as there is in the country."

Vance said that "the double standard of it is something that would hit hard regardless of the politics. This area doesn't like a separate standard applied to anyone." But Vance said it was too early to

assess the impact on the November elections, except that "to some degree it associates Ford with the whole Nixon mess."

Vance noted that one Republican incumbent the

Democrats hope to beat, Rep. John Buchanan (R-Ala.), proposed "immunity" for Mr. Nixon before Mr. Ford's pardon, but "I would not think a Democratic candidate would be wise to dwell on it. We have not yet turned our backs on Nixon."

Another prominent Midwestern Republican Party leader, who declined to allow use of his name, said GOP campaign headquarters in his state were receiving many critical calls about the President's action.

"It's definitely a minus," he said. "First that business on amnesty, and now this. Until these things, you couldn't believe the change among party workers (with Mr. Ford in the White House). He was like a breath of fresh air. It was exhilarating. But amnesty and now this, they propel Watergate back onto the front pages."

Gov. George C. Wallace (D-Ala.) was less critical than most of his colleagues at the Governors' Conference. The President has that prerogative, no matter what you think of it," he said. "I don't know whether I agree with him or not, but it seems like he could have been premature."

Wallace said that Mr. Ford's handling of the economic issues of inflation, high interest and unemployment would determine not only the 1974 election but that of 1976. "If he can solve those problems, he'll be in good shape," Wallace said, "and if he can't he'll be in bad shape."

Gov. Dale Bumpers (D-Ark.) called the pardon "injudicious and premature," and suggested that consideration be given to amending the Constitution to limit presidential pardons to people who have been tried and convicted of some crime.

Sen. Lloyd Bentsen (D-Tex.), a conference visitor and chairman of the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee, said he was "concerned particularly about the timing" of Mr. Ford's action but repeatedly stressed that Democrats will campaign this fall on economic issues—not the pardon.

The Republicans lined up behind Mr. Ford, but not with much enthusiasm. Gov. Mills E. Godwin Jr. (R-Va.) said Mr. Ford would be commended "for keeping a rather long and tortuous period of grand jury investigations and trials from taking place. That would have served no useful purpose for the nation," he said.

One prominent Republican, however, expressed suspicion of the pardon. Martha Mitchell, estranged wife of former Attorney General and Watergate defendant John N. Mitchell, told United Press International in Hot Springs, Ark.:

"I don't care if Jerry never talks to me again, I'm sure there was a deal with President Nixon before the resignation. I knew Nixon had something up his sleeve when he left the White House. Nixon's just as guilty as anybody else and it's a horrible, horrible thing. I don't feel sorry for him or his family either, because they're too stupid to know what they're doing."

Mrs. Mitchell said she was "extremely bitter" because the pardon shows "there are two standards of justice. It's a bad precedent. I don't believe in pardoning one person and not pardoning everybody else, especially when they're the ones that did the dirty work for him. And that goes even for old (H. R.) Haldeman and old (John D.) Ehrlichman, whom I hate."