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Watergate Altered Congress

A Year Later, It's Back to Normal—but Different

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A year to the day after he joined his House Judiciary Committee colleagues in the historic impeachment debate that led to the resignation of President Nixon, the thought of Rep. Paul S. Sarbanes (D-Md.) were 6,800 miles away.

The Baltimore Democrat was once again on center stage in the House, this time as a leader of the small band of pro-Greece lawmakers who fought an ultimately successful battle to block resumption of arms to Turkey.

Meanwhile, another Judiciary Committee member, Rep. M. Caldwell Butler (R-Va.) was greeting a reporter who had come to his office for an interview. "Robert E. Lee, I presume?" asked the Roanoke Republican, facetiously suggesting that the subject of the interview was about his recent role in restoring the Confederate general's citizenship posthumously.

Little-known men of vastly different backgrounds and political outlooks, the liberal Maryland Democrat and conservative Virginia Republican found their paths intertwined briefly for the political drama of the century—crossing a year ago this week when they joined in support of the first of the Committee's articles of impeachment.

Now, like their colleagues, they have returned to the normal routine of congressional business. They agree, although in different ways, that last year's trauma left an imprint that lingers on after the forced resignation of a President and transcends their own memories of instant fame and painful decisions.

Both say Congress in several ways has shown a greater sensitivity to potential executive-branch excesses. Sarbanes adds that Congress has been forced by events to concentrate on other problems and he questions whether laws can

prevent abuses without persistent vigilance.

Seemingly more so than Sarbanes, Butler believes that the trauma of impeachment led to fundamental changes in Congress, to an expansion of the role it sees for itself in the federal system.

"Definitely, Congress is feeling its position as an equal partner in the system," said Butler. "It's feeling its oats, but it hasn't gotten enough of a sense of direction as to be perfectly clear where it's going."

As an example, Butler cited congressional efforts at oversight of the executive branch, principally the ongoing probes into alleged excesses by governmental intelligence agencies.

"I don't think we were even conscious of the situation two years ago," he said.

Butler also mentioned congressional vetoes of presidential actions in the military field, the most recent of which was the effort by Sarbanes and others (which Butler did not support) to block the administration from resuming some arms aid to Turkey because of that country's use of U.S. supplies in invading Cyprus.

The executive branch under President Ford has changed too, he said, citing in particular a more cooperative attitude on the part of the Justice Department since Edward H. Levi became Attorney General.

Butler's point on executive branch cooperation was supported by Committee Chairman Peter W. Rodino (D-N.J.), who said, in an interview, "We've found they are coming forth now and doing so because they know Congress insists on it."

Added Rodino: "Congress called the most powerful man to account and they know it will certainly demand the same of others."

Sarbanes was less inclined to generalize about changes in congressional and executive responsiveness than Butler. He warned instead that Watergate and its aftermath show that only persist-

ent vigilance will prevent recurrence of abuses.

Sarbanes saw positive signs of congressional response in the congressional investigation of intelligence activities, noting that, "What Watergate did is to make Congress and the country realize that flat assertions from government were simply not enough."

In addition, he said, reform of campaign financing grew in part out of Nixon campaign abuses that contributed to the impeachment momentum. Congress' recent assertion of its powers over both war powers and budget-making, while not resulting directly from the impeachment effort, had their roots in the Nixon administration's conduct of government, he added.

Impeachment itself tended to be overtaken by events, especially the nation's economic and energy difficulties, said Sarbanes.

At the same time, Sarbanes said, the Ford administration did not want to

rake over the coals left by its predecessor by pressing for Watergate-related reforms. "It's a past that the current administration wants to leave behind" he said.

As to whether Congress can really protect the nation against a recurrence, Sarbanes was doubtful.

"It can always reoccur," he said. "I don't think anyone should deceive themselves into thinking that that kind of abuse of power couldn't reoccur or that laws in themselves could prevent it. After all, laws were broken."