

Democrats Turn to Nixon And Watergate as Issues

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Jimmy Carter pledged that he never would tut-tut aloud about Watergate as a way to supplant President Ford in the White House. But his fellow Democrats still choose to kick Richard Nixon around to get at his successor.

They have done so all week and did so again last night in Madison Square Garden. Watergate is at once the target of the Democrats' National Convention rhetoric, the not-so-subliminal issue that abetted the ratification of Mr. Carter's politics of virtue, and the well-spring of the party's enthusiasm for a Nov. 2 contest with President Ford.

Mr. Carter need not mention Watergate or the Nixon pardon. Other Democrats are willing to do so, with or without his encouragement.

There was symbol enough in Mr. Carter's choice of Peter W. Rodino Jr., the New Jersey Representative who directed the Nixon impeachment inquiry, to nominate him for President last night. Even so, the Carter staff encouraged Mr. Rodino's allusion to a national faith "shaken by the resignation in disgrace of a President and his Vice President and by the issuance of an untimely pardon that outraged the American sense of equal justice."

An Impeachment Echo

It was not accidental that Barbara C. Jordan, the black Texan with slate-like self assurance and eloquence with the ring of fine crystal, delivered a convention keynote address and that Paul S. Sarbanes of Maryland presented a platform plank on law enforcement by vowing never to tolerate "lawlessness in government." Both served with Mr. Rodino on the House Judiciary Committee that helped drive Mr. Nixon from office and then inquired formally into the pardon. PU

If Watergate subverted their last bid for the White House, the Democrats are clearly trying to make it a foundation for this one.

"Four years ago, when Watergate was a reality in the Presidential campaign, we didn't believe it because we didn't know all the facts," said Richard Celeste, Ohio's lieutenant governor.

This year, after Senate Watergate hearings and House impeachment proceedings, after the Nixon resignation, the Ford pardon and the inundation of scores of Republicans in the backwash of the 1974 Congressional elections, Mr. Carter evidently feels the scandal is a matter about which the electorate has taken judicial notice.

Silent on Watergate

The former Georgia Governor is said to have excised any mention of the topic from the draft of the acceptance speech he will deliver tonight in the Garden.

But an aide to Mr. Carter

asked Mr. Rodino's staff if the chairman of the impeachment committee was likely to mention the pardon in his nomination address. The answer was yes, and the Carter aide offered no objection, thereby foreshadowing a campaign in which other Democrats would raise the issue in behalf of the Presidential nominee.

Several did so in the Garden with the avidity of prosecutors outlining an open-and-shut case to a venire of national television jurors.

"The American people," said Robert S. Strauss, the Democratic national chairman, "can forgive and forget many things, but they cannot and will not pardon an Administration and a governmental philosophy which has undermined our nation for eight painful years."

"The American people have had enough of Nixon-Ford," he said, setting a pattern for other speakers to hyphenate two Presidents into a single target.

Senator John Glenn's otherwise bland opening night speech was enlivened by a reference to "the unprecedented disgrace of Watergate." The Democrats' unsuccessful nominee of the Watergate election year, Senator George McGovern, felicitously reminded the convention of a line that emerged from Ronald Reagan's camp: "Congressman Ford couldn't pardon Nixon; President Ford did."

Humphrey Attacks G.O.P.

Senator Hubert H. Humphrey, the "happy warrior," roused the Garden audience to a roar with a declaration that, under the Republicans, "crime has reached into the highest offices in the land."

"They took it off the streets," he said. "They put it in the White House."

The slick magazine produced by the Democratic National Committee as a convention program devoted a page to a facetious quiz. It listed 51 officials from the Nixon and Ford Administrations and provided space to identify "one President and Vice President forced to resign, one appointed President, two appointed Vice Presidents, seven Attorneys General" and other titles.

For all that, there was some counterpoint in what was not done or said at this convention. The Democrats abandoned a tradition of bedecking their meeting place with larger-than-life portraits of past heroes, who would perforce have included Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, who led the nation into the Vietnam War.

Nor was there any mention from the Garden rostrum of such Democrats of the present as Representatives Wilbur D. Mills and Wayne Hays. They may be remembering Richard Nixon but the Democrats would as soon forget Fanne Foxe and Elizabeth Ray.