

Keepers of the flame

The Nixon White House always has rejoiced in its enemies, or "adversaries" as they are known in post-Watergate euphemism, but there is little joy in Mudville these days about the opposition of Senator James Buckley. Next to a denunciation from Barry Goldwater or from Ronald Reagan, there is nothing that could have galled the White House as much as Buckley's call for resignation, and all the more so because it was the administration's "radic-lib" campaign of 1970 that enabled Buckley to become the junior senator from New York. Deep down, the administration had always counted upon the conservatives not to abandon Richard Nixon when the going got rough, no matter how much they disapproved of Watergate or the latest unbalanced budget. The White House survivors agree, essentially, with the view of their former Office of Economic Opportunity dismantler, Howard Phillips, that conservatives are "the crucial component" of the President's support. "What Buckley has done," said Phillips, "is pull a plug on the President's most important political reservoir. It doesn't mean that all the water will flow out. It does mean that conservatives will reassess whether the issues they care most about can be served by continued support for President Nixon."

Privately, many conservatives in Congress were delighted at Buckley's statement, even though Goldwater and Reagan, among others, had tried to talk him out of making it. On a not-for-attribution basis, many rank-and-file conservative congressmen expressed admiration for Buckley's stand; publicly, these congressmen voiced respect for Buckley's sincerity and disagreement with his position. "A number of those 27 percent supporting the President also are supporting me," said one conservative House member who won last time by a narrow margin. "I'm glad Buckley's saying it, but I can't."

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One conservative whose public expressions came out somewhat bolder than this, while not embracing resignation, was Representative John Rousselot of San Marino. Rousselot has come a long way since 1962, when he worked for the John Birch Society, which was hot stuff in California, and Richard Nixon was jettisoning the Birchers in an effort to straddle the center in his unsuccessful gubernatorial race against Pat Brown. Rousselot lost that year, too, although he returned to Congress in June 1970 and now faces a future that seems considerably brighter than Nixon's.

Still technically a Bircher, though not since 1966 an employee of the society, Rousselot at 47 is a genial, well-informed congressman who has gradually gained the respect of his Republican colleagues. He is now an officer of the 70-member group of House conservatives

known as the Republican Steering Committee and the director of a GOP public-relations training program. Like a number of people in the old Nixon White House, Rousselot is a Christian Scientist who outworks many of his colleagues and neither smokes nor drinks. Unlike the Haldeman crowd, Rousselot has a sense of humor and is motivated by broader impulses than the Nixon cult. Along with most other conservatives, he is appalled by the revelations of Watergate while somewhat reluctant to get out in front in the attack on the President.

"Conservatives don't want to lead the charge," says Rousselot. "They don't want to ask for a public hanging in the square. But there is quite a lot of disgust at what has been going on." Rousselot spoke what is on the minds of many Republicans of any ideology when he predicted that the President might reassess his position if the House votes an impeachment resolution. "If the House did in fact vote impeachment . . . and the Senate started the proceedings and it became obvious that events were going against the President, he might take another view of resignation," Rousselot said. "Maybe this is what Wilbur Mills was trying to say."

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It is a difficult period for the keepers of the conservative flame. On the one hand, they have little use for Nixon and many wish they had never supported him in the first place. (One of the loudest bursts of applause at a recent political conference of the American Conservative Union and Young Americans for Freedom came when ACU President M. Stanton Evans referred to the "mistake we made in Miami in 1968.") Most conservatives also are angered by Nixon's deficit budget and annoyed by his seeming support of a liberalized legal services program.

On the other hand, conservatives are genuinely fearful of what they regard as the radical surgery of impeachment and the precedent it might set for a future President held at bay by a Democratic Congress and the "liberal" media. This principled opposition, and a general inclination to define impeachable conduct very narrowly, is accompanied by the reluctance of many congressmen to risk their own political necks by appearing to join Nixon's opponents in the impeachment proceedings. They are thus driven by the contradictory logic of their position to a secret preference — or an open one in Buckley's case — for the least constitutional solution of all, the so-called remedy of resignation.

At first, the inherent illogic of resignation seemed to work in favor of the White House. Letters to Buck-

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idea whose time is past.

— John P. Grier