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THE PRESIDENCY

BY HUGH SIDEY

Rekindling the Spirit of '76

The bad economic news is not only in the newspapers. It is at the vegetable counter and in the doctor's office and it overwhelms, for most Americans, every other concern from Red China to the Pentagon papers. The angry wage demands, the desperate price hikes show a new level of uncertainty and fear. Yet those who look to Richard Nixon for help seem to see him merely sitting there and smiling, sheltered from the economic gale by the plastic cubicle of the presidency, continually insisting that better times are just around the corner.

Maybe they are. But the fact is that Nixon, who refuses to jawbone about prices and wages, is out jawboning earnestly on another economic front. He is stumping the boondocks and the banquet halls, like some kind of boardroom Paul Revere, in response to the challenge he defined at Kansas City not long ago. "We see five great economic superpowers: the United States, Western Europe, the Soviet Union, mainland China and, of course, Japan. . . . The United States is still the strongest . . . the richest . . . but now we face a situation where four other potential economic powers have the capacity, have the kind of people . . . who can challenge us on every front."

In international economic war, Nixon suggests, this country is up against it. A loss could affect our way of life far more than any military engagement. The supreme irony is that we invented the modern marketplace, and that's where we are slowly losing our shirts. For the first time in 78 years we may import more than we export this year. Behind the statistics is the even more depressing feeling that we are losing our initiative and ingenuity in devising products and services that help both environment and society.

A chubby young wizard of practical trade, Peter Peterson, former head of Bell & Howell, is Nixon's field marshal in this campaign. Old Pete, as he already is known, has devised something the boys call "the peep show." It is an assemblage of charts and graphs that chillingly show the United States slipping backward in almost every area of world economic power and prestige. Peterson puts on his show in the Cabinet Room and on the Hill. More than once Nixon has told his guests, "This is the most important briefing you will get."

The President has renamed Air Force One *Spirit of '76*. That is a slogan of our bicentennial celebration. But it has another significance. Nixon's real message is that we must recapture our old reputation as Yankee traders.

He uses just those words in his office. "We're not about to paint our tails white and run with the antelopes," he told his Productivity Commission. On his last visit to San Clemente, he got to his desk in the morning before anybody was up and around and promptly put in a call to Washington, where they were already at work. His first questions were about meeting the trade competition. Japan seemed to loom over him there on the Pacific rim.

He broods about reinstilling pride in tradesmen, about bringing excellence to production lines, about finding dignity in work. He sent one of his aides up the California coast to find out what they were saying in the bars about the work ethic. Nixon totally disagrees with the idea that leisure should become more important and gratifying than work.

In a nighttime phone call Nixon talked of his friend Robert Abplanalp, whose home in the Bahamas he uses. The President related with relish how this fellow who dropped out of college tinkered in his machine shop and came up with the aerosol valve that revolutionized the container business and made him a multimillionaire. "What about Dr. [Edwin] Land?" Nixon asked suddenly one night while on the phone with an aide. "How do we get more Doctor Lands?" For 15 minutes Nixon listened to the aide describe the career of the Polaroid genius and, when the staff member apologized for talking so much, asked still more questions about Dr. Land.

The President believes that the Yankee spirit he is trying to rekindle may have been extinguished totally in the ghettos, which is another urgent reason to recast our outdated economic machine. He still fancies that out there on the prairies of the Midwest, where there are space and raw materials, where men in a bicycle shop thought up the airplane, '76 is alive—just dormant. "The spirit of a nation comes from people like you, from the heartland of America," he said when he was tramping around Indiana to dedicate a marker for the birthplace of his mother. A fortnight ago, at the Football Hall of Fame banquet in Canton, Ohio, he dwelt on the coming economic competition and called for "a spirit of trying to do our very best. . . ."

Nixon quite rightly perceives that if we accept second-class status in trade, then the same rank in world power is inevitable. The attitude will ultimately pervade the nation. There are schemes afoot to stimulate technology, encourage new sources of energy, entice modernization of antiquated industries, negotiate fairer trade agreements with the emerging foreign giants. All this will take new legislation and new inspiration. In short, the greatest sales job in history.

Without playing down the importance of this endeavor, however, it might be noted that Nixon's approach to it is revealing. In his two and a half years, the President has spotted and defined with remarkable accuracy the problems of our society. He and his staff have held the necessary meetings, written the pertinent memos, drawn up the correct flow charts and issued the right press releases. But almost every major effort requiring domestic change has faltered there.

The President and his men have not sweated the long hours with obstreperous congressmen. They have refused to let dissidents intrude on their tidy schedules. They have mistaken memos for human meaning and flawless, close-order bureaucratic drill for real government. They have in an odd way managed to be lazy even while putting in all that work. By avoiding the tiring, bewildering battles of men and ideas and taking refuge in their executive privileges and organization tables, they have shown their smug conviction that big desks and cool, calm offices set the national mood. The domestic economic scene happens to be setting the national mood just now, and it is painfully chaotic. To deal with it and, ultimately, with the larger economic challenge from abroad will require some hard, realistic, unpleasant body contact of the kind the White House has preferred to avoid. Perhaps Nixon's first task in kindling the Spirit of '76 is to engage the real Yankee world.

Nixon shakes hands with Bicentennial Commission Chairman David Mahoney, and waves before boarding the renamed Air Force One for a trip to the Midwest.