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THE PRESIDENCY BY HUGH SIDNEY

Heady days of presidential power

He came down the aisle of his Convair on the way back from West Virginia a few days ago, dressed in banker's gray, and paused to talk to a few reporters in the front seats. With a slight smile on his face and just a trace of disappointment in his voice, he said that he would have to watch the World Series on television. Then, almost as an afterthought, he murmured, "I have a lot of stuff—a lot of work—on for the next two weeks . . . and for you, too, you'll see."

The setting was so unspectacular and the banter so mundane, that Richard Nixon might have been any big-time industrialist or insurance executive returning home after a useful day on the road. But coming from the President of the United States, the small jest in the aisle of the plane actually heralded a fortnight of extraordinary national and international developments. Within the following few days, Nixon unleashed forces that will change the nature of economic America and affect the strategic power balance of the world. Such is the staggering power of this man of plain habits and unadorned speech.

It is high theater that Nixon is playing. It could flop at a cost literally incalculable to us all. But just now there is an exhilaration in Washington not seen for many months. There is new interest in Nixon's leadership. It is as if he had suddenly finished his period of incubation, or as if he had swept aside those small minds which have isolated him from reality for so long and is now out and running on his own. No one really knows; a crucial part of the puzzle is that Nixon the man is not much better understood now than the day he came into office. There are two new books out about his days in the White House, but they explain almost nothing. Does he have a Grand Design for humanity? How does he intend to control and mold all these forces he has loosed?

He still works in loneliness and silence. Not in a full decade has a President been able to conceive plans, and set them up in such secrecy and then announce them with such stunning impact.

Last week he walked through his routine, dropping thunderclaps with a restrained pleasure. His first job was to win from curmudgeon George Meany and 21 million Americans in organized labor an endorsement of Phase Two of the new economic controls. Meany snorted his displeasure at the idea that the Cost of Living Council, run by Treasury Secretary John Connally, might veto the rulings of the pay board on which labor's representatives were to serve. Meany summoned the AFL-CIO Council to

headquarters just across Lafayette Square from the White House—and over the years there have been doubts as to which side of the square has the most power. Nixon listened to the rumblings and looked across the sun-washed stretches of grass and flowerbeds for a couple of days. Then he made up his mind to do what Meany wanted. He dispatched Secretary of Labor James Hodgson and aide George Shultz with a statement laying it out. Down at the bottom, penned in black ink, was "OK, R.N." Meany looked through his cigar haze at the small initials which have so much behind them and marched out to the television cameras, grumbling his basic antagonisms with this administration but saying he would go along with the President. He also said something else about the power game that went almost unnoticed. Still puffing his cigar, he confessed in his own splendid style that no matter what was said and signed, in the end Nixon could do what he wanted: "If he feels at some time that they [the new boards] are running contrary to what he is trying to do, he will put them out of business. . . . It is just the same as the Walter Hicken case. He felt Walter wasn't playing the game, so he gave Walter the heave-ho."

At that very moment, Meany's words were being smothered by even bigger news, although none of the 50 or so reporters sitting in the White House press room waiting for the press conference to begin guessed it. The klieg lights burned, but they all thought they would hear just another announcement about the economy. Nixon came quickly down the carpeted corridor, took the podium and announced his trip to Moscow next May. His voice was shaky, he seemed nervous. "The leaders of the United States and the Soviet Union . . . have agreed that a meeting between them would be desirable. . . ." The world moved a little bit.

A few moments later, Nixon was in the Cabinet Room with the bipartisan congressional leaders. Again, in a few simple sentences he told of the new summit plans. The momentum of the presidency swept everybody along. All the men there registered their support. Louisiana's Senator Allen Ellender, noted for his globe-trotting and endless reels of home movies he takes on his trips, was enthusiastic. "I've been to every part of the Soviet Union," he told Nixon. "I want the opportunity to talk with you before you go. Maybe you would like to look at my movies." Richard Nixon was feeling so good that he said yes.

By afternoon of the same day the President was on the Hill helping to unveil a portrait of Congressman F. Edward Hébert, chairman of

the Armed Services Committee. In a room glittering with the brass of generals and admirals, he addressed himself to another of the week's concerns: new evidence of the massive Russian arms buildup. He recognized the worry that he might arrive in Moscow with the U.S. at a military disadvantage. "The United States must maintain its defense at adequate levels," he said.

There were other things, too, lying back on his desk. The crisis in the FBI finally demanded his action. The aging J. Edgar Hoover would have to be eased out before the end of the year or Nixon would face a major convulsion in the FBI, dispirited now because of the petty tyrannies of the 76-year-old director. More important than that—and potentially more important than any other item on the week's agenda of presidential power—were the two empty seats on the Supreme Court. Who filled them could determine the nature of the Court for decades to come, and the President had promised to come up with both nominees in a matter of days.

At week's end, Nixon headed off toward North Carolina to pay tribute to Evangelist Billy Graham, his friend and counselor. Somebody at the White House wondered if he wasn't really going down to get in a little talk with God, conceivably the only contact he hadn't made earlier in the week.



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