

# *Nixon on Nixon: Tough Decisions*



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Associated Press

# Require Calm

Post 1/14/73  
By Saul Pett

Associated Press

Dec. 20, shortly after 3 p.m., a rare springlike day. A benign sun warmed the gardens visible through the windows of glass one and a half inches thick, which were installed in Franklin Roosevelt's time. The Oval Office, in this time, has a serene, unused tone, like a city street on a Sunday morning.

The President wore a light blue suit, white shirt, blue tie and, as usual, a small metal American flag in his lapel, and blue and white cuff links bearing the presidential seal. He seated his visitor and himself in the two chairs with their backs to the fireplace.

"Will you have something—coffee or tea?"

His visitor hesitated.

"Oh, have something," Richard Nixon said, pressing a button. Black coffee soon arrived. The President folded his hands neatly in his lap and we began.

"How do you feel in this job after four years?"

"I've been fortunate. I haven't had to miss a day because of illness. I thought that was some kind of a record but I find that Truman beat it, except he didn't do it in an elected four-year term. So, I'm the first four-year President who hasn't missed a day in office, providing I make it to January 20.

"I've been blessed with a strong physical makeup, probably as a result of inheritance. You know, I've never had a headache in my life and my stomach never bothers me.

"I believe in the battle, whether it's the battle of a campaign or the battle of this office, which is a continuing battle. It's always there wherever you go. I, perhaps, carry it more than others because that's my way."

"I've never before met a man who didn't even have a headache," said Dr. Walter Tkach, the President's physician. His picture of the President's health at 60, after four bruising years in office and four more to go, appeared remarkable:

Weight: 173, precisely what it was 20 years ago. Varies only by a pound or two gained on weekends and dropped the following week.

None of the usual medical signs of tension. Blood pressure: 110-80. Pulse: 72. Variance: only about five points, even in times of intensity, said the doctor, and that includes the crisis over Cambodia, the trips to China and Russia. The doctor examines the President once a week.

Allergies: None. Takes no vitamins

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or regular medication. Worst thing he's had in four years was a cold and sore throat.

"My only concern is that he's working more and exercising less," said the doctor. "He's given up bowling. No golf. He used to run 400 strides in place every morning. Now it's between 200 and 400.

"But aside from graying a little, he shows less change accelerated by his office than most of his predecessors. He's probably one of the healthiest Presidents we've ever had."

"It's important to live like a Spartan," the President was saying, "to have moderate eating and drinking habits. That's not to say I don't enjoy a good time.

"But the worst thing you can do in this job is to relax, to let up.

"One must have physical and mental discipline here. This office as presently furnished probably would drive President Johnson up the wall. He liked things going on. He kept three TV sets

here. I have none here or in my bedroom.

"I find to handle crises the most important qualities one needs are balance, objectivity, an ability to act coolly."

The President's hands had left his lap and, characteristically, he was now beginning to gesture with both arms or right fist pumping or one hand counting off points on the fingers of the other, body tilting slightly right, left or forward.

His mood seemed to be one of confidence and, as his points developed, rising stimulation, perhaps even exhilaration. Aware that it has become an object of parody, aides report, the President now restrains himself from saying, "Let me make this perfectly clear." But he still gives the impression of a man who can't help saying it viscerally, with subconscious body English.

He spoke of some of the "tough decisions" he has made, mentioning the movement into Cambodia and the decision May 8 to bomb North Vietnam and mine Haiphong Harbor on the eve of his trip to Moscow.

"People," he said, "probably think the President was jumping up and down, barking orders, at those times. Actually, I have a reputation for being the coolest person in the room. In a way I am—I have trained myself to be that. The great decisions in this office require calm.

"I could go up the wall watching TV commentators. I don't. I get my news from the news summary the staff prepares every day and it's great; it gives all sides.

"I never watch TV commentators or the news shows when they are about me. That's because I don't want decisions influenced by personal emotional reactions."

Between two gold couches, I could see the President's big, very neat, oak desk, "the Wilson desk." Long an admirer of Woodrow Wilson, he told an interviewer in 1968: "I think he was our greatest President of this century . . . Wilson had the greatest vision of America's world role. But he wasn't practical enough. Take his 'open agreements openly arrived at.' That is not the way diplomacy is conducted. The Vietnamese war, for instance, will be settled in secret high-level negotiations."

Richard Nixon has used "the Wilson desk" for 12 years, eight as Vice President and four in the White House. But a few days before our talks, an aide whispered to me:

"It turns out that was not Woodrow Wilson's desk but was used by Henry Wilson, who was Grant's Vice President. I'm not sure the President has been told yet."

"The major weakness of inexperience

enced people," the President was saying," is that they take things personally, especially in politics, and that can destroy you . . .

"Years ago, when I was a young congressman, things got under my skin. Herblock the cartoonist got to me . . . But now when I walk into this office I am cool and calm. I read the news summary and get both sides. That's important because there are so many emotional issues these days, such as the war and busing and welfare.

"But I never allow myself to get emotional. Now, there are congressmen and senators who cut me up; Fulbright, for example. But when he comes here, we're the best of friends, at least, I feel I am.

"Now, it's not true that I don't feel emotional or pay attention to what others feel. But the most important thing I can do is to make decisions for the long run.

"Vietnam, for example. Now, we're having a difficult time. Things don't seem as bright as they did. So, we've had to continue the May 8 policy to bomb the North.

"We will obtain the right kind of peace but we won't get it because of artificial deadlines, such as the election or Christmas or the inaugural."

This was said on the third day of the bombing resumption ordered by the President and eight days before he stopped it. In asking for the interview, I had told his staff I would not ask substantive questions about public issues but would seek only to elicit his personality and mood these days.

Could I now, I wondered, ask about Vietnam since he had brought it up? But Presidents are not easily interrupted and this one on this day was now stressing the importance of perspective and that his reading of history and biography help in maintaining a perspective.

Then he said:

"Now when Henry Kissinger comes in here in the morning and brings up what Scotty Reston and the other columnists are saying, I tell him, 'Henry, all that matters is that it comes out all right. Six months from now, nobody will remember what the columnists wrote.'

"Decision makers can't be affected by current opinion, by TV barking at you and commentators banging away with the idea that World War III is coming because of the mining of Hai-

phong. Nor can decisions be affected by the demonstrators outside."

In his relentless effort to avoid emotional distraction, to find and hold perspective, Richard Nixon spends more and more time away from the Oval Office of the White House. Thus, its uninvited-in look, being used primarily for ceremony, official visits and staff discussions.

His more important work, it is said,

is done in one of three places, where he thinks, studies papers, makes notes on the yellow legal pad and is either alone or working with only a few people. These are his two-room suite in the Executive Office Building across from the White House, the Lincoln Sitting Room in the residence and Camp David, the presidential retreat high and well isolated in the forests of the Catoctin Mountains of Maryland, where the uninvited are discouraged by a double steel fence and United States Marines with sidearms.

Explaining his increasing use of Camp David, greater than that of any of his predecessors, the President told reporters:

"I find that getting away from the White House, from the Oval Office, from that 100 yards that one walks every day from the President's bedroom to the President's office or the extra 50 yards across to the EOB, getting away gives a sense of perspective which is very, very useful.

"One constantly has the problem of either getting on top of the job or having the job get on top of you. I find that up here on top of a mountain it is easier for me to get on top of the job, to think in a more certainly relaxed way . . . also in a way in which one, if not interrupted either physically or personally or any other way, can think objectively with perception. . ."

Among his think-work places reporters have been permitted to see, the EOB suite seems the most lived-in. The walls of the outer room are covered with cartoons involving the tenant.

"Any Herblocks here?" I asked the aide showing me through. "You kidding"

The inner office is heavy with souvenir gavels, footballs, elephants, family pictures, a signed golf card recording a hole in one for Richard Nixon in 1961 and, among plaques, one attesting to the fact that he was made an "honorary special agent of the FBI" by J. Edgar Hoover.

There is a beige lounge chair in the corner near a dictaphone and a hi-fi set on which the President is said to enjoy musical comedy tunes and the music of Tchaikovsky and Liszt while he is working.

On the desk were four books which appeared to be current presidential reading when I was there, or books being called to his attention. On top was one in which about two dozen pages were marked with paper clips. This was Herman Wouk's "The Winds of War," a romantic best seller about World War II in which the ubiquitous hero commutes between Roosevelt, Churchill, Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin, and just about everybody else who counted then. He is in constant motion in more world capitals than even Henry Kissinger. One theme of the book is the danger of weakness and

the danger of not recognizing bluff in international negotiations.

There were also Noel Busch's biography of Theodore Roosevelt, whom President Nixon admires; "The Throne of Saturn," a novel by Allen Drury, and "Creed or Chaos?" a collection of theological essays and talks by Dorothy L. Sayers, who is better known as a mystery writer.

According to the publisher's resume, the Drury book concerns this:

"The U.S. races to put the first man on the Planet Mars. . . . There is a maverick veteran astronaut who demands a place on the crew; a moody, race-centered Negro doctor, whose refusal to cooperate jeopardizes the lives of his crew mates; a union leader who tries to sabotage the flight for sinister political purposes; and, most of all, a constant barrage of critical opposition from the nation's press, broadcast media and advantage-seeking politicians."

The President continued his discussion of crisis-handling, a subject he has found compelling for years.

"I'll probably do better in the next four years having gone through a few crises in the White House, having weathered them and learned how to handle them coolly and not subjectively.

" . . . I probably am more objective—I don't mean this as self-serving—than most leaders. . . . When you're too subjective, you tend to make mistakes."

"Mr. President, despite the continuing problem, is it possible to relax at all in this job after four years?"

The President thought a moment.

"In speeches or press conferences or interviews," he said, "you have to be up and sharp. You can't be relaxed. The Redskins were relaxed in their last game of the regular season and they were flat and they got clobbered.

"You must be up for the great events. Up but not up tight.

"Having done it so often, I perhaps have a finer honed sense of this. But you can overdo it, overtrain and leave your fight in the dressing room."

He cited as an example a law school exam which he had over-studied for at Duke University, one he apparently didn't score well in. But then, if you're relaxed at a press conference, he said, "you can muff one."

The President returned to his larger theme.

"When I came into office, I'd been through enough—those shattering defeats in 1960 and 1962, and then those eight years 'in the wilderness,' the way deGaulle and Churchill were.

"The result was I was able to confront tough problems without flapping. I don't flap easily. An individual tends to go to pieces when he's inexperienced . . .

"Now, there are just not many kinds of tough problems I haven't had to face one way or another. In that respect, the fact that my political career

a blessing."

Victory and defeat, conflict and competition, challenge and test, control and constant vigilance against mistakes, the battle and "the arena" as Teddy Roosevelt called it—these are continually recurring motifs.

"He almost scintillates in adversity," said a former assistant, who has known Richard Nixon for years in and out of the White House. He cited "The Nixon fund" of 1952, when Dwight Eisenhower came close to dropping Nixon as his vice presidential candidate; "the torment of 1956," when Mr. Eisenhower again threatened to dump him; the narrow defeat for President by John Kennedy and, perhaps bitterest of all, the defeat for governor of California in 1962 in his native state.

"He's tough, he's unwilling to lose," said John Ehrlichman, presidential assistant for domestic affairs. "He's not one to make assumptions based on optimism. He very much believes you make your own successes."

"He's a man continually testing himself," said another member of the staff. "Usually that was the next election. Now he's taking on and reorganizing the federal bureaucracy, which, of course, needs it. He needs the sense of battle. If it weren't the bureaucracy, he'd find a surrogate target."

In 1968, in the afterglow of his first presidential victory, his first triumph in an election in 12 years and the first on his own in 18, Richard Nixon was talking to friends of his youth in California. He said he had learned "so much" from football in college.

"You get knocked down day after day and you keep coming back. You get knocked down enough and keep fighting back, you learn you can't win them all. But you learn that if you keep trying that some day you may be able to win."

In the introduction to his book, "Six Crises," Mr. Nixon wrote in 1961:

"A man who has never lost himself in a cause bigger than himself has missed one of life's mountaintop experiences. Only in losing himself does he find himself. . . ."

And on the last page:

"Those who have known great crisis—its challenge and tension, its victory and defeat—can never become adjusted to a more leisurely and orderly pace. They have drunk too deeply of the stuff which really makes life exciting and worth living to be satisfied with the froth."

Until some time after 1962, Richard Nixon apparently was a climber who was unable to trust anyone else in his battle to reach the top of the mountain. He had been battered and bruised. He had come so close in 1960—within a few feet—and in 1962 couldn't even scale a lesser peak that had seemed a sure thing.

"He was up tight in the campaigns



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"I have a reputation for being the coolest person in the room."

required a comeback may have been

of '60 and '62," said Ehrlichman. "He was unable to delegate authority. He didn't feel he could rely on anyone else fully to take some responsibility for his political future. But by the '68 campaign, he had come to see that he couldn't hold all the strings in his hands, that that was self-defeating."

Now, in our talk in the Oval Office,

the President was making the point that it is important to spend less time on unimportant matters in his job by delegating authority. He said:

"If somebody here can do it better, he does. Now, Grover Cleveland read every bill that came before him. These days you can't. You'd go blind; there are so many. He'd rather do something poorly himself than somebody else do it well. I am the reverse."

"But I make all the important decisions, domestic or foreign. And when major decisions are involved, I put everything else out of my mind."

"I'd been thinking of that long, long climb to the top, the bitter fights, the tantalizing near-miss, the first ascension to the White House as a minority President."

"Mr. President, considering your political career and those defeats you mentioned, the landslide this year must have been doubly sweet. Can you tell me some of your feelings election night?"

Richard Nixon smiled and looked down at his hands, which were temporarily grounded.

"Well, the greatest pleasure was the kick the young people — Tricia and Julie — and Pat got out of it. Those defeats in 1960 and 1962 were so traumatic for them. To most women, things look black or white; a man tends to roll with events."

"Oh sure, I took it pretty hard myself. But then there was 1968 and 1972 capped it all, despite all that talk about a one-term presidency."

"After four years of the most devastating attacks on TV, in much of the media, in editorials and columns, and the all that talk in the last two or three weeks of the campaign of the gap narrowing . . . and then whap! A landslide, 49 states, 61 per cent of the vote!"

The President paused.

"You'd think I'd be elated then. But it has always been my experience that it doesn't really come to that."

"But the family — David and Eddie (sons-in-law) — kept running to me in the Lincoln Sitting Room with the results. They were so excited they made me feel excited. Then, after my TV talk here and at the Shoreham Hotel and staying up for the California returns . . . Well, you're so drained emotionally at the end, you can't feel much. You'd think that just when the time comes you'd have your greatest day."

But there is this letdown."

A man who should know said, "Election night the President was in agony. A tooth had broken off and medication didn't help the pain. But don't quote me."

Another man who should know said, "It was nothing. Part of a cap broke off. There was no pain, no medication required. But don't quote me."

Election day, the President happened to drop his ballot in his voting booth. As he bent down to recover it, photographers took pictures. Over the loud objections of Ron Ziegler, the press secretary.

Does the President wear glasses at all for reading? "Now, and then," said an authoritative source, "but don't quote me." Does he cat-nap at all? "Yes," said another man, "but get it from somebody else."

It is a hallmark of the Nixon admin-

istration that even innocuous human details about the leader are hard to come by. The timidity of his staff in passing them on is most commonly attributed to the boss's unusual sense of privacy. In the world's most public job, the President maintains a moat around himself. He is, he has said, "an introvert in an extrovert profession."

"He doesn't invite affection because he is not at ease with people," said a former assistant. "He has been bruised too much. It might be that if you, think you're liked you become likable. Maybe the landslide will do that for him, the way the first few years in the White House caused Pat Nixon to emerge and become more spontaneous and self assured."

Despite years in politics requiring the gregariousness of a hyperthyroid Rotarian, chit-chat does not come easily to the President, most aides agree, and he seems to have to work at it. During the last campaign, he met for a few moments of informal conversation and pictures with James and John Roosevelt, two sons of the Democratic President who were now endorsing Mr. Nixon. "The boss boned up the night before," said an assistant, "by watching two and a half hours of film clips of Franklin Roosevelt."

In Rome, chatting with some American bishops, the President remarked that he sometimes awakened with the odd feeling that there was something important he had to tell the President, an instant before remembering he was President. The remark was derivative of one made once by Pope John, researched and supplied by presidential speech writers. They also supplied, and the President used in Rome, "the three greatest loyalties" of Vince Lombardi, the late football coach: One, God; Two, his family; three, the Green Bay Packers.

On rare occasion, rarer even than his news conferences, White House re-

porters see the President informally. One such was New Year's Eve, 1970, when he invited a few in for drinks in the EOB office. He delivered a small talk on how to make "the world's best martinis," made them and, while they drank his approvingly, he nursed a glass of wine.

"He was quite pleasant but you had the feeling this was a chore for him, to show us his informal side," one reporter recalled.

At a news briefing last month, Ziegler was asked about a report that the President was seen "strolling in purple flared trousers."

Ziegler: "Flared is a bit of an exaggeration."

He did confirm that the President owns pants without cuffs, adding, "he's a regular guy; he wears sports clothes."

Nonetheless, Richard Nixon remains a formal, serious man, who is rarely seen without jacket and tie even while flying in Air Force One, strolling at his home in San Clemente, Calif., or sitting alone, reading, under a palm tree in Key Biscayne, Fla.

Even in private moments of impatience, his staff insists, the President rarely goes farther than an occasional "damn," making him quite different from his four immediate predecessors in the White House. On some of the few occasions he goes beyond, says one aide, "he does it deliberately for emphasis and seems to have to steel himself to bring the word out."

Back in the Oval Office,

"Sir, do you find that the presidency is a continuous learning process?"

"Oh, absolutely, certainly," he said. "It is for everyone in this job." He turned the conversation to matters of more immediate interest to him.

"Now, there are some people leaving the administration and some staying. I try to recharge them. There can never be a letdown in this office. That's the danger of a landslide. I want everyone to have a new charge, a new sense of challenge."

"... There are those who say there are no restraints on a President if he doesn't have to run again. That is really a fatuous and superficial analysis of the presidency. . . ."

"Individuals who serve here do not serve to get re-elected but to do greater things. And they could be even greater when you don't have to worry about re-election."

"Now, what we want to do, we want everybody to think the challenge is just as great. The leader has to whip them up. The team goes just as fast as the leader, as the quarterback and coach, and I am both."

Richard Nixon began to "whip them up" the morning after election, after a few hours of enjoying what one man called "measured pleasure" in his

landslide. On Nov. 9, at staff and Cabinet meetings, he thanked his people for their efforts and stressed the need for renewed vitality in the second term.

Pro forma resignations came in, some much less formal than others. Some were accepted with no regret expressed, others with "regret," "deep regret," "very special regret," "sincere personal regret" and other carefully calibrated expressions of sorrow. The President was letting the bureaucracy know who was in charge. He was determined, it was said, to make it more responsive to him in his second term.

After four years in the job he is more self assured but is "less relaxed in the sense that he is working harder and longer," according to Robert Haldeman, his chief of staff.

The whip is cracking.

"He now tells us," says Ehrlichman, "there are only 1,000 days left—this assumes a President can't get much done in his last year—and that we've got to remind ourselves every day how much time is left to get things done."

In all this, the self discipline of the quarterback-coach would appear to be legendary. Another assistant quotes him as saying, "People don't understand; I always have to be up, or at least appear that way."

This assistant was talking about the President's self-control.

"For example, he gets irregular but terrible attacks of hay fever, and he—"

"But his doctor says he has no allergies, definitely no hay fever."

"He doesn't tell the doctor; he disguises it. I've been with him in meetings when he looked perfectly fine. Then, as soon as the other people left, he was sneezing and his eyes were watering."

So, back to Dr. Tkach.

"The President does not have hay fever," he said. "The symptoms can not be disguised without medication and he gets no medication."

That would seem to have done it.

But a few days later, I was rereading portions of "Six Crises" by Richard Nixon and there on page 393, he recalled that tears came to his eyes as a result of a touching comment by his daughter, Julie, in the sad aftermath of his 1960 defeat.

And in the sixth paragraph, the author wrote, "I told Julie my hay fever was bothering me."

Back in the Oval Office. . . .

"Mr. President, surely there is some sense of relief being out from under the pressure of re-election?"

"Well, campaigning is a great experience, win or lose. People should not be afraid to step up to it. You know, there are people in the House

and the administration, who are 40 or 45, who should run for higher posts, but they get too cautious, they want to stick to the safe jobs. You can't be afraid to take chances in politics. But not foolish chances . . .

"This game affects the life of the nation and the world. For that reason, an individual, whether he's a President or a member of Congress or the Senate or the Cabinet must always play the game of politics and statesmanship right up to the hilt.

"As to a sense of relief over not having to face another election . . . Well, I still have a responsibility to help my party and others who share my views. I will meet that.

"There is some relief not to have to spend time with people from state after state who say you have to do this or that or you won't win. How a campaign might be affected does have some small influence. But now that is gone. I don't have to think of all those niggling details, such as who should get what airport."

The President paused and smiled. "But it's also true that when you win 49 states, they'll all get good treatment. Now, about Massachusetts, I've got so many Harvard men in the administration, Massachusetts will be treated right.

" . . . There is some relief not to have to do something solely for political purposes. You still have to lead, to travel to the country and get the support of the people. But taking the personal factor out is, indeed, one of the major dividends of not having to run again."

After many years of bitter controversy, of attack and counterattack, of charges of "the plastic man" and clichés about the "old Nixon," the "new Nixon" and the "new-new Nixon," a reporter who pursues the essence of his personality feels somehow vaguely dissatisfied at each turn in the trail. He opens one door to open another door and yet another door, and asks, finally, the people who work closest to him: "If I knew him as well as you do, what else might I know.

what might surprise me?"

His aides and assistants appear sympathetic to the question; they seem to realize that much does not come through in the public image, much remains invisible behind a mist curtain of design and circumstance.

They say this, that beyond what the public may see in intense effort, ambition, ability, courage and dedication, that he is privately a man of warmth and kindness.

They speak of his many acts of personal thoughtfulness: of refusing to go to any more football games because "20 people have to be displaced"; of sending an encouraging letter and autographed picture to the ill mother of an assistant; of making a point of meeting an aide's family and saying "they're nice"; of making available, within a half-hour of hearing of Harry Truman's illness, a plane for his daughter; of inviting, on learning he liked to fish, one of the White House elevator operators to Key Biscayne with him; of writing a three-page letter of advice to the son of an assistant on learning the boy was entering law school.

In an introduction to a small picture book about her father, Julie Nixon Eisenhower told readers she hoped they would get "the impression of my father that so many people miss—dignified when he needs to be, but never stuffy." Several of his aides make the same point in discussing the difference between the public and private man.

"What is most different," said one aide, "is that in private he is unafraid to let his intellectual sophistication come through. In public, in his speeches, he thinks that the best way to reach people is through the lowest common denominator. In private, he sees distinctions and subtleties, and gets behind language.

"He is strong on using the same phrases over and over again in his speeches, like in an advertising campaign. And if a speech writer wants to be certain he'll get a paragraph in, he'll find an historic first.

"He is privately sophisticated enough to be a bit embarrassed by this. He will write in the margins of a submitted speech 'not enough cheer lines' or 'not enough grabbers.' Discussing this, he will do it with a grin that implies that this or that may be over-simplification but you need a little show biz."

Back in the Oval Office, Ron Ziegler had come in a second time to remind the President that he was running late for his next appointment. The President, who had been generous with his time, wanted to make another point about a man in his position.

Rising and leading me across the office, he said:

"It's important never to look back unless you can learn about the future. Once a thing is done, it's done, and I look ahead. And you can't look to the future myopically. It's important to have the long view here. That's why it's a good thing this office is oval; it's easier to get the long view."