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Part 12/13

Personalizing the Presidency

As Watergate troubles thicken, President Nixon tends more and more to personalize his office. It's not just that his individual traits become increasingly evident.

More important, to a larger and larger degree, major national and international matters are treated as facets of the Nixon autobiography. That means the country is passing through a dicy period in which normally manageable problems can be transformed by ego involvement into grave perils.

The characteristic feature of Mr. Nixon's first term was the impersonal nature of his presidency. He held himself aloof from the public. He surrounded himself with men, who except for Henry Kissinger, were faceless beings unknown for anything except loyalty to Mr. Nixon.

The staff of unknowns drained power from the Cabinet, which also became increasingly bloodless. A working principle of the staff, indeed, was to prevent face-to-face encounters between the President and Cabinet figures identified with particular policies. By the use of so-called option papers, the President was even saved the task of making explicit choices between competing departments.

Watergate has shattered the original staff. The most prestigious newcomers to the White House staff—notably former Defense Secretary Melvin Laird—are more interested in the institution of the presidency and the future of the Republican Party than in Mr. Nixon. Even his personal chief of staff, Gen. Alexander Haig, remarked the other

day, in an interview with Laurence Stern of this newspaper, that he hoped the Watergate counterattack would restore confidence in the "office of the presidency."

In these conditions, the real Nixon has more and more been obliged to come front and center. Practically everybody has noticed the non-synchronization between words and gestures—as when he speaks of the whole world and cups his hands as if it were no larger than a dried pea. A nationwide TV audience heard him refer, by mistake, to his former staff members as "guilty until I have evidence that they are not guilty."

But these are mere bagatelles compared to the injection of self into major developments. The most serious case in point was the alert which the President ordered in the last week of October after receiving what was evidently a very tough note from the Soviet leader, Leonid Brezhnev.

In discussing that episode at his news conference of Oct. 26, the President three times made it a personal issue. Thus in one of his comments, Mr. Nixon said: "Because I had a basis of communication with Mr. Brezhnev, we not only avoided a confrontation, but we moved a great step toward real peace in the Middle East."

Similarly with respect to gas rationing as a way to ease the energy crisis. The President was asked about the possibility of rationing at his meeting with the Associated Press managing editors at Disney World on Nov. 17.

"I was once in OPA," Mr. Nixon said, as he began his response. There followed a couple of hundred words about tire rationing under the Office of Price Administration in the early stages of World War II. That led to the conclusion that gas rationing would be "something the American people would resent very, very much."

Before that, when the issue of a boycott by the oil-producing countries was raised, Mr. Nixon came up with another piece of personal reminiscence. At his news conference of Sept. 5, he made reference to an episode which occurred back in 1953, when he was Vice President, and Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh of Iran was trying to operate a nationalized oil industry. The President said: "Oil without a market, as Dr. Mossadegh learned many, many years ago, does not do a country much good."

Many other examples, in particular comments about this country's European allies, could be cited. But the point does not need to be labored. Watergate has forced Mr. Nixon into the open, warts and all. He now tends to judge even large and complex matters by standards of intensely personal experience. These standards are often not germane, and they can lead us all astray if not worse. So while there can be no backing down from Watergate, it does seem that the sooner Mr. Nixon can be prevailed upon to step down, the better for everybody.