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Mr. Nixon: Achieving His Goals

It is so easy to dwell on the reduction in the political circumstances—and the consequent deflation of the rhetoric—of Richard M. Nixon during the past year that one loses sight of the persistence of his policies. But the budget that came out this week shows how mistaken it is to underestimate even a beleaguered President's ability to control the basic direction of national affairs.

Mr. Nixon presented his latest budget, covering fiscal year 1975, with the meekness of a mouse. He offered his spending proposals with the diffident air of a man who knows he is at 26 per cent in the polls of public support, and sinking.

For all its employment of the vertical pronoun, Mr. Nixon's budget message contained no single sentence reminiscent of the muscle-flexing of 1973. That year he confronted Congress with eight closely printed pages of favorite programs he had ticketed for "reduction or termination," and said magisterially that his budget represented "the kind of change in direction demanded by the great majority of the American people."

A year ago, at the budget briefing, the President's economic lieutenants brandished the impoundment weapon like a shillelagh over the head of Congress. This year, with impoundment weakened by a string of adverse decisions in the courts and with no further desire to aggravate those who will be voting on the President's impeachment, deputy budget director Fred Malek said Mr. Nixon hoped to avoid any but "routine, noncontroversial" withholdings of funds.

Roy Ash, the point-man in last year's "battle of the budget," was away at his mother's funeral. Secretary of Treasury George Shultz, the ranking spokesman present, showed up with a miserable cold that impaired everything but his indomitable sense of humor.

He did not bother to deny the rumors of his own imminent departure and readily conceded defeat in his long battle against the public service employment program, distasteful to his free enterprise soul. "I've given up fighting it," said Shultz, in what sounded like an epitaph for the Nixon economics philosophy.

But the symptoms of defeatism are more than a bit misleading, for a look at the budget documents shows not the defeat of the President's objectives but their fulfillment.

To start with the simplest and most basic of all goals, Mr. Nixon came to office pledged to halt the growth of federal government which, in true conservative fashion, he said was consuming a disproportionate share of the national wealth. He has done so.

Despite the headlines proclaiming the first \$300 billion budget, the percentage of the gross national product going to the federal government, which had grown in all but one of the previous half-decades since World War II, has essentially leveled off during the past five years.

Mr. Nixon said in his first budget message that he hoped to see a shift from military to domestic spending. The share of the budget represented by defense has declined 15 per cent, while the share represented by human resources spending has grown a like amount.

He said he wanted state and local governments freed of their dependence on Washington, and the corner has been turned toward that goal. After continuing a steady growth through 1973, the share of federal expenditures allocated to state-local grant-in-aid programs, and the share of state-local budgets provided by Washington are both estimated to turn down this year and next.

Moreover, one federal dollar in eight now reaches state and local governments without strings, through general revenue sharing. And the passage of the first block grant for manpower programs last year may signal a further increase in these relatively unrestricted funds' percentage of the total federal aid package.

These are only the broadest of the measures of Mr. Nixon's successes in setting governmental and budgetary priorities—some achieved with Congress' cooperation and some over the opposition of the Democratic legislators.

There are other significant symptoms of the same success in the shift to an "income strategy" of direct cash payments to the elderly, the needy and those employed by the government in military and civilian jobs, rather than the provision of indirect subsidies and benefits.

What all this suggests is that the power of the President to set the most important national strategies—even a President beleaguered by problems—is not to be underestimated. That power is especially irresistible when the political opposition offers no coherent strategy of its own. Such has been the case with the Democrats since Mr. Nixon took office.

The only budgetary force that even he seems unable to control is the irresistible, geometric growth of Social Security. And at his age, that is probably a "defeat" he can accept with equanimity.