

Part 5/1/73

Mr. Nixon's 'Larger Duties'

President Nixon said, in his television address on Monday evening, that he has had to spend too much time lately on the internal scandals of his administration. "I must now turn my full attention once again to the larger duties of this office," he observed, after announcing that he was turning the investigation of the scandals over to his subordinate, the Attorney General-designate, Mr. Richardson. "There is vital work to be done toward our goal of a lasting structure of peace in the world—work that cannot wait. Work that I must do." As soon as the following morning, he pointed out, he was to confer at the White House with Chancellor Brandt of West Germany.

It must be a very strong temptation for Mr. Nixon, in this bitter time, to retreat to the decorous and ceremonious world of foreign affairs. But that would be an exceedingly dangerous retreat—dangerous for Mr. Nixon and more dangerous for the country. A democratic government's foreign policy can never be any stronger or sounder than that government's standing at home and its support among its own people.

There is always a certain tendency to speak of foreign affairs in terms of the chess board. But governments keep a shrewd and unsentimental surveillance on each others' internal circumstances. When they see the erosion of power, they recognize it and, if the need arises, they make the most of it.

The Brandt visit illustrates the point a good deal better than Mr. Nixon ever intended. He presumably brought the Germans here just now in an effort to build a certain momentum toward later negotiations with Europe. But what he has in fact succeeded in doing is to expose the disarray of his administration, and the mounting evidence of systematic corruption, at first-hand to the men who are the government of West Germany—the largest of the European nations, the most powerful, and the best disposed to cooperate with us on both arms and economics. As long as Mr. Brandt and his colleagues remained in Bonn, they knew the Watergate case only as a thin trickle of newspaper stories and perhaps occasional low-keyed diplomatic reporting. At a distance of several thousand miles, it is easy to dismiss the whole affair as the kind of routine embarrassment that is a normal hazard of political life. The European press, over the winter, has not made much of the affair.

But now, having spent the past few days in Washington, the Brandt party cannot have missed the true and desperate significance of the scandals. Having seen Mr.

Nixon's speech on television for themselves, they cannot have failed to catch the urgent anxiety in his words. They have seen the reaction from leading members of Congress. It would be impossible for any experienced politician to have spent this week in Washington and still believe that Mr. Nixon's troubles are merely the kind of customary domestic irritations that other governments can ignore.

It has now begun to dawn on our German visitors that Mr. Nixon's trade bill is in grave jeopardy. Any Congress, in any year, finds it difficult to vote for a trade bill that is opposed by the labor movement. The only way that any President ever gets trade legislation enacted is by climbing up on his white horse and talking about the greater national interest. Mr. Nixon's white horse is currently not in service. It is, to use the familiar term, inoperative. If the trade bill does not move forward rapidly, the whole policy toward Europe will decline into stagnation. Perhaps the magnitude of this possibility was not evident to the German government from the detached perspective of Bonn. But it is plain enough to them now.

Some of our German visitors are candid enough to point out, quietly, that Mr. Nixon's weakness increases the prices that other nations can extract from him, in the constant bargaining and negotiation that is the substance of foreign affairs. The Germans are presumably not the only foreign government to perceive this effect, and not all foreign governments are as well disposed toward us as the Germans.

Former Secretary of State Dean Rusk once quoted President Roosevelt as having said that the New Deal was his foreign policy. Mr. Rusk then added that Lyndon B. Johnson's foreign policy began with the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Democratic governments earn their right to speak abroad from the support and trust that they enjoy at home. Pretending that foreign policy is separate from the administration's standing at home is a luxury no longer available to Mr. Nixon. He spoke on Monday of the "larger duties" of his office, and the "vital work to be done," as though politics abroad were obviously nobler and more important than politics at home. To the contrary, the largest duty of the President's office this week is to re-establish some degree of its traditional moral authority in the eyes of the American people. The most vital work to be done in the White House, in this unhappy season, is to regain the administration's sadly damaged capacity to speak for the American nation.