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Feigning Business as Usual

Suppose they called a Cabinet meeting and nobody came? Well, smart guy, that isn't so funny; last week it almost happened.

The three senior departmental chiefs and two lesser fry were absent from the session which President Nixon held last Thursday. And that says a lot about how the shadow of impeachment affects the way Washington works these days.

Normally Cabinet meetings are called to bear public witness that the President is on the stick, tending to the national business in an orderly way. That was particularly the idea behind the meeting set for last Thursday. Besides the Cabinet meeting, Mr. Nixon had a morning marked by absolute routine.

He announced the appointment of a new Chief of Naval Operations and the expansion of his Committee on Mental Retardation. He met with the new American ambassador to Mauritius, with a departing White House aide, and with a Republican woman worker from Houston, Tex.—one Mrs. Martin Erck.

It would be hard to imagine a schedule more perfectly calculated to convey the assurance of business going on as usual, unaffected by the brouhaha about Watergate. Just in case anybody had any doubts, the White House press spokesman, Gerald Warren, said that the Cabinet did not discuss Watergate or impeachment.

So what did they discuss? Well, according to Mr. Warren, there was a general discussion of the President's program. The Secretary of Commerce, Fred Dent, talked about the trade bill.

The Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare, Caspar Weinberger, talked about the new comprehensive health insurance program. He also rapped a little about the new welfare reform package which his department is preparing.

Finally another Cabinet member mentioned with approval the President's statement the night before, that the 1974 elections would be decided by "peace and prosperity." Mr. Warren said that the Cabinet registered general agreement with that proposition.

Well, how about the economy? Didn't they talk about that? As a matter of fact, no. George Shultz, the Secretary of the Treasury, was in Chile attending a meeting of the Inter-American Development Bank.

How about the Mideast and relations with the Soviet Union? Well, no. Henry Kissinger, the Secretary of

State, was returning from Moscow.

How about national security and the volunteer army and troops in Europe? Did they talk about that? Well, no. Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger couldn't come to the Cabinet meeting because he had previously scheduled a press conference.

Okay. So Shultz and Kissinger and Schlesinger have special responsibilities. But the rest of the Cabinet is working as a team, isn't it?

Sure. Only Atty. Gen. William Saxbe had to go to Quantico to address a graduating class at the FBI academy. And Secretary of Transportation Claude Brinegar had to be in Mexico for what an aide called some kind of "international conclave."

Well, the President could have briefed the Cabinet on the economy and national security himself, couldn't he? Maybe. But there's a lot of evidence that the President really isn't

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all that clued-in on what Secretaries Shultz and Kissinger and Schlesinger have been doing.

For example, in an appearance in Chicago on March 15, Mr. Nixon asserted that inflation "plagues us but plagues the rest of the world even more." Apparently he was unaware that the latest numbers showed the

United States doing worse than most of the other industrialized nations in the fight to curb rising prices.

At the same Chicago meeting he said that "we have had SALT I and SALT II and we will have SALT III in our meetings with the Soviet leaders this year." In fact, only the first round of talks on the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty has been completed. SALT II is up for discussion this year and SALT III is not even in the picture.

But if Mr. Nixon's isn't concentrating on the economy and foreign policy and defense, what does concern him? Well, the truth is that he's concerned—and rightly concerned—about just what the Cabinet meeting was supposed to gloss over. He's worried about impeachment. He's fighting survival, which is why he has left all the main business of state to his senior Cabinet associates.