

Joseph Kraft

Mr. Nixon: A Weakened President

Per 7/17/73

You don't have to be Sigmund Freud, or even deep into psychology, to see that illness did not strike the President any old time. It occurred at a moment of intense strain, on Watergate and other matters. The stress is not going to ease rapidly. So the illness may well be a portent of a President weakened seriously for a long time.

The most impressive sign of the strain on Mr. Nixon is the disarray now plainly visible in the White House staff. Julie Eisenhower, the President's own daughter, was put down by a White House spokesman when she indicated that the President, playing devil's advocate, had spoken of resigning at a family get-together at Camp David on May 4.

Melvin Laird, the former Defense Secretary who came on the staff last month as almost an assistant President, is also having troubles. In an on the record interview with Washington Post reporter David Broder, Laird moved to push Ron Ziegler from his post as press secretary. But Mr. Ziegler seems to be stronger than ever.

Fred Buzhardt, the White House special counsel on Watergate, has similar difficulties. Probably the most important action he has yet taken was the memo and series of questions prepared for the Senate committee about to interrogate former presidential counsel John Dean. Since the memo implicated former Attorney General John Mitchell in a criminal conspiracy, it strains credulity to believe Mr. Buzhardt sent up the document without checking with Mr. Nixon. Still the White House spokesman insisted the President has not reviewed it.

These signs of trouble find their roots in real life problems. The Senate Watergate hearings during the past 10 days have been bad enough. Perhaps the revelation by former White House aide Alexander Butterfield of a total bugging system for presidential conversations will not be damaging. Maybe Richard Moore, the white-haired special counsel to the President who couldn't remember any-



thing, will evoke sympathy after the fashion of the poor dog, Checkers. No doubt John Mitchell showed himself a witness hard to shake.

But the Mitchell testimony yielded one hard point which cannot be gained. If the President had at any time asked him about Watergate, the former attorney general says he would have told him "chapter and verse." Thus it has been clearly established that when it came to Watergate, Mr. Nixon wanted to hear no evil, see no evil and speak no evil.

On top of the poor show at the Senate hearings, other difficulties associated with Watergate are mounting. Public interest in the financing of the President's house at San Clemente has climbed to the point where it seems about to eclipse the original Watergate scandal. A House committee investigation under Rep. Jack Brooks, a tough

Democrat from Texas, is shaping up.

Apart from Watergate, two additional problems of immense scope weigh down on the President. Galloping inflation has jolted markets, and there is now widespread demand that the President prove he can manage the economy effectively. There are things that could be done to advertise his grip on affairs—a move towards new taxes; an extension of the price freeze; and some tightening of discipline over labor. But if the President tried to apply such policies he might drive the economy into deeper trouble—perhaps to the point of touching off a new recession.

Nor can the troubles be offset by the President's favorite equalizer—foreign policy. Mr. Nixon's claim of peace with honor in Indochina seems to be discredited by the continuation of fighting and political unraveling. Events in

By Oscar Berzer

Indochina, if they are moving anywhere, seem to be tending toward a resurrection of the President's old enemy, Prince Norodom Sihanouk.

Spectaculars built around summit meetings don't work either. Most of the other leaders in the world are as beset as Mr. Nixon with internal troubles. Reunions at the top of Everest only underline the fact that they are midgets.

What all this says is self-evident. Mr. Nixon is hemmed in with difficulties. He is bound to be physically drained, even to the point of illness. He is the opposite of a quitter, and the country has no stomach for impeachment. Perhaps there is opening up the possibility of retirement on grounds of health. But if not, the outlook is for a President who is, in effect, a long-term lame duck.

© 1973, Publishers-Hall Syndicate