

# Some See Nixon Health as Loop-hole for Him to Quit

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Washington, — "As long as I am physically able . . ."

This seemingly innocuous phrase, used by President Nixon recently when insisting he would stay in office, probably would not have caused a ripple of interest a year ago.

But in the current climate of tension and suspicion brought by the Watergate disclosures, it has aroused a new round of questions and a speculation about the President's physical and mental state.

For some time, Mr. Nixon's health and morale, and the motives behind his words and actions, have been a topic in Washington.

A nationally prominent psychiatrist who has warned of the dangers of any effort to probe a President's psyche on the basis of his public appearances said that nevertheless Mr. Nixon's health was a topic of frequent discussions among psychiatrists.

The President's spokesmen have consistently described his health as good since he recovered from viral pneumonia last July.

But, the White House has become ultrasensitive to any interpretation of the President's behavior that might cast doubt on his ability to govern. Ad this, in turn, is shaping what Mr. Nixon does and says.

His current Operation Candor, in which he has met with congressmen and governors to discuss his Watergate problems, was designed partly to demonstrate that he was not suffering impairment from the months of pressure he has undergone.

Reaction to his "physically able" statements demonstrates the difficulty he faces in allaying suspicions.

He first used the phrase on Nov. 6, as an addendum to a nationally televised talk on energy, saying he had no intention of resigning and declaring that "as long as I am physically able, I am going to

continue to work 16 to 18 hours a day" to carry out the duties of the office.

Mr. Nixon repeated the phrase in his televised appearance before the Associated Press Managing Editors Association in Florida on Nov. 17. He also said, "I am relatively healthy at the present time."

## Phrase Discounted

His two closest assistants, Alexander M. Haig Jr. and Ronald L. Ziegler, said in response to questions that the President's use of the phrase had had no particular meaning and did not imply any deterioration of Mr. Nixon's health.

Nevertheless they advised him to stop using it, and when he addressed the International Seafarer's Union here Nov. 26, again declaring his intention to stay on as President he made no mention of his health.

But the reverberations have continued. In last week's issue of Newsweek magazine, the following item appeared in the Periscope column:

"President Nixon's attack of viral pneumonia, which put him into Bethesda Naval Hospital for nine days in July, was more serious than White House bulletins indicated. A top official recalls that Mr. Nixon was coughing blood before going to Bethesda and that his condition 'scared hell' out of his White House visitor."

[The White House physician, Dr. Walter Tkach, told the Associated Press in a telephone interview that there was "no truth whatever" to the report about coughing blood. "I see him just about every day," said the doctor. "Occasionally he looks tired," but except for that, Mr. Nixon

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on is "well." He is scheduled for a physical examination at Bethesda Naval Medical Center in mid-December.]

## Back Too Soon

Reports that the President's illness was worse than reported have been circulated by officials in the White House over a period of several months. According to medical reports made public at the time, the President had made a full recovery. But some of his assistants have expressed concern that President Nixon might have gone back to a full work schedule too soon.

It was during that period that Mr. Nixon publicly shoved Mr. Ziegler in New Orleans, slurred his words in addresses and on occasions showed a shortness of temper.

## Health Provision

In Congress and elsewhere, however, skepticism of the White House runs so deep that there is a belief that the Presi-



dent's reference to his physical limitations and the reports about his health are designed to give him a loophole in the declarations that he will continue in office.

There has been speculation by some in Congress that after Gerald R. Ford is confirmed as Vice President, Mr. Nixon might activate Section 3 of the 25th Amendment which says:

"... Whenever the President transmits to the President pro tempore of the Senate and the Speaker of the House of Representatives his written declaration that he is unable to discharge the powers and duties of his office, and until he transmits to them a written declaration to the contrary, such powers and duties shall be discharged by the Vice President as acting President."

Some members of Congress

have been consulting medical authorities on their opinions as to Mr. Nixon's health and on the possibility that the President's decision-making ability might be impaired in the months ahead. Under the 25th Amendment, Congress has the ultimate responsibility of deciding if a President is disabled.

Mr. Nixon, in an interview last December, said, "I've been blessed with a strong physical makeup. I never had a headache in my life, and my stomach never bothers me." It is important, he said, "to live like a Spartan."

Throughout his Watergate troubles, Mr. Nixon's spokesmen have charged that rumors about the mental strain on the President were "simply unfounded" and denied that he has been under the care of a psychiatrist or psychologist or

that he takes medication, regularly.

Several factors, however, have given rise to the speculation and keep it boiling.

#### Accusations Cited

One is continuous accusations from persons in high places that some of Mr. Nixon's decisions are irrational. After he dismissed the special Watergate prosecutor, Archibald Cox, Representative B. F. Sisk, a conservative Democrat of California, said publicly what many in Congress were saying privately — that the President's "actions raise real questions to me of whether or not he's thinking straight."

Georgey Meany, president of the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations, put it more bluntly, charging dangerous emotional instability of the President.

The White House called the charge "incredible, inexcusable and irresponsible."

Former Attorney General Elliot L. Richardson said one reason for negotiating the resignation of Spiro T. Agnew as Vice President, to make way for a new Vice President not under criminal charges, was that Mr. Nixon had "showed a considerable sense of strain" at mid-summer.

#### Question of Governing

This remark raised in political circles the question of how long he could continue to govern. The White House responded that the President was in firm control in all matters.

Every time talk of the President's health has begun to subside, some new White House action has revived it — the series of disclosures of missing conversations from the Watergate tapes record-

ings; the alert of American forces in the Middle East Crisis, which some in Congress thought was over-emphasized by the President; the confusion within the Administration over the energy shortage.

#### Appearance Factor

Another factor is the President's appearance and personal behavior. Here there is ambiguity that feeds the talk. Ever since the Watergate disclosures began on a large scale in April, Mr. Nixon has alternated between periods of secluded brooding and bursts of public appearances.

He usually looks better in person than he does on television. Some of the senators, representatives, governors and others who have seen Mr. Nixon in his recent round of discussions have expressed surprise that he looked so well and seemed so self-confident,

considering the circumstances.

Others, however, note that at times his face appears a little puffy, that he frequently stumbles over his words, that his physical gestures sometimes seem too animated and jerky, that his tendency to ramble has increased, that his displays of good spirit and

humor seem artificial, and that in unguarded moments he seems unduly irritated and fatigued.