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Two Routes to Congress

Butter wouldn't have melted in the mouth of President Nixon when he breakfasted with the Democratic congressional leadership early this week. But the same day he issued a second state of the union message which one Democratic leader termed "a tirade of political lies."

So in assessing the President's intention respecting the Congress, consideration must be given to the extraordinarily wide gap between his formal and his informal statements. My own interpretation is that, apart from wanting to get away from Watergate, the Nixon administration really doesn't know what it wants from the Congress.

Speaking privately to the Democratic leadership, Mr. Nixon was relaxed and easy. House Speaker Carl Albert remarked to a colleague that the meeting was the best he had at the White House since Mr. Nixon became president.

On substance, Mr. Nixon was as mild as his manner. A good example was the trade bill. He indicated he would like to have a trade bill through the House by Oct. 1. The Democratic leaders thought that would be possible. In a rare mark of deference, the President asked how they would feel if, during the illness of Chairman Wilbur Mills, he conferred with other members of the Ways and Means Committee. Naturally, they had no objections.

Two subjects of undoubted controversy did come up. The President made a strong plea for passage of his foreign aid bill. The House leaders said there would be no passage unless the President accepted an amendment by Wayne Hays of Ohio curbing his war powers. They indicated, and the President seemed to accept their view, that perhaps the best they could do was not a bill but an interim resolution continuing foreign aid at last year's levels.

The other hot item was the defense budget, and particularly troops in Europe. The President said that he had discussed the troop issue with Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev. He indicated that Brezhnev would pull Russian troops out of the satellites if the Pres-

ident pulled American troops out of allied countries. Mr. Nixon said any action by Congress would spoil his play with Brezhnev.

The congressional leaders pointed out that there were enough votes in the Senate, and perhaps in the House, to pass some kind of measure cutting back troops. They advised the President to find a compromise, and he did not demur.

The formal state of the union message which was released a few hours later bore almost no relation to the meeting with the congressional leaders. For one thing, it mentioned a great many subjects Mr. Nixon did not take up at all with the leadership. One of not small import, for example, was reform of electoral campaign practices.

On the two issues in dispute, the message took a very hard line. Mr. Nixon suggested he would veto changes in the defense budget and a foreign aid bill that clipped presidential authority.

A similarly tough position was taken by the President on a whole range of issues which had been earlier discussed in tones of compromise. In the matter of education, for example, the message raised the question of busing which Mr. Nixon had left severely alone in the meeting.

Various explanations have been offered for the gap between Mr. Nixon's conciliatory positions with the leadership and the stiff tone of his formal message. One theory is that the President is deliberately buttering up the Democratic leaders to drive a wedge between them and the Democratic rank and file. The reasoning is that the leadership, convinced of Mr. Nixon's basic moderation, will try to cooperate.

The followers, convinced of the President's hard line, will try to push for direct confrontation. The result will be Democratic disarray which the President can then blame for the failure of his legislative program.

My own sense is that the White House has been too wounded by Watergate for the playing of such com-

plicated games. I think Mr. Nixon and the men around him are now divided. His own instinct is to take up a siege position. But some of his advisers favor accommodation with the outside world, and when he emerges from isolation he tends to go along with that advice.

Accordingly, however much the recent spate of appearances by the President may be staged to offset Watergate, they seem to me a good thing. For when engaged in face to face contact with different groups, Mr. Nixon is obliged to lean at least a little toward a more moderate tone the country clearly requires.

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