

Nixon Sees Vindication By History

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By Lou Cannon

Washington Post Staff Writer

SAN CLEMENTE, Calif., Dec. 30 — President Nixon believes that the "judgment of history" will rank him as a president of high achievement despite the Watergate scandal, according to top aide Alexander M. Haig Jr.

"Neither the President nor his staff are the least bit self-conscious about what the administration has done for this country and for the ordinary citizen in it," White House Chief of Staff Haig said in an interview today. "In any other time, without Watergate, this is what the American people would be saying."

Haig and other officials accompanying Mr. Nixon on his working vacation in San Clemente concede that the "without Watergate" reservation is an important one. They concede that the administration still has "survivability" problems, particularly if the Watergate special prosecutor should find that Mr. Nixon was implicated in the coverup. But they insist that the President has not been immobilized by the Watergate crisis and that his attention is now focused on the far-ranging presidential action that Mr. Nixon believes will form the basis of the historical judgment about him.

Mr. Nixon's aides say he is now doing "serious stocktaking" of a highly private nature. He has engaged in such solitary pleasures as taking long walks on the beach and reading a recent book about

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Abraham Lincoln, and watching football games on color television. He has also worked steadily to reduce a mound of paperwork relating to unsigned legislation and on a variety of options presented to him for his State of the Union address next month.

What that message will say has yet to be decided. But the President has reached some broad-scale conclusions on what he hopes to propose—and to reject—as his 1973 initiatives.

The administration's foreign policy posture is viewed as a delicate mix of continued efforts to broaden the detente with the Soviet Union combined with increased defense spending on American missile capability. It is the administration view that support of Democratic liberals for Israel has given the President an opportunity to win congressional approval of a bigger defense budget while at the same time continuing to work with the Soviet Union to stabilize the situation in the Middle East.

Domestically, the President has decided not to propose the negative income tax advocated by departing counsellor Melvin R. Laird as a means of helping the poor. Nor will the administration revive the controversial Family Assistance Plan. Instead, Mr. Nixon will propose increased spending for programs modeled after the manpower bill he signed last week, which provides local governments with the money and the say-so on manpower training programs.

Mr. Nixon praised that bill as "one of the finest pieces of legislation" he had seen since the enactment of the administration's measure for general revenue sharing.

More immediately, he has decided to sign legislation providing for a two-stage 11 per cent increase in Social Security benefits, one of 36 unsigned measures remaining on his desk after the signing of three bills today. The President is expected to state his misgivings about this measure when he signs it, probably on Jan. 2.

Mr. Nixon considers the bill, which would add an estimated \$1 billion to the federal budget for 1974, to be highly inflationary.

Today, Mr. Nixon watched the National Football League playoff games on television, at times turning off the sound to

read reports on legislation that was before him. Two of the bills he signed today were private relief measures granting individual aliens permanent residence in the United States; the other was a measure postponing until July 1, 1975, a fee schedule that would have allowed "non-poor" families to participate in the Head Start program.

Mr. Nixon is described by his aides as vastly preferring the opportunities for quiet relaxation and contemplation provided him at San Clemente in comparison to Washington.

Haig says the President's present combination of work, reflection and rest "lends itself better to the quietude of San Clemente than it does to the Oval Office."

Others in the administration view the President's current mood as one of near-withdrawal and of a reassertion of his long-standing penchant for privacy.

Mr. Nixon has left the San Clemente compound only once, when he attended the wedding of his physician, Dr. Walter Tkach, last Friday. On that occasion he did not attend the wedding reception but drove immediately back to San Clemente, where he had dinner with his wife and watched a movie.

"The President doesn't want to see anyone, and no one really wants to see the President," says one White House official. He wants to be alone as much as possible, and we appreciate that."

This official concedes that Mr. Nixon is sometimes resentful, even bitter, about the critical treatment he feels he has received at the hands of the press because of Watergate. But he says that the President is not despondent.

It is more a question, this aide says, of Mr. Nixon lacking someone to unburden himself to, as he used to do with his two top aides, H. R. Haldeman and John Ehrlichman. When Haldeman and Ehrlichman were fired in the wake of the President's admission of White House staff involvement in the Watergate scandal, the role of confidant was assumed by Mr. Nixon's close friend, Charles (Bebe) Rebozo.

On his last trip to San Clemente in August the President spent much of his free time with Rebozo. The two men walked the beach together and once slipped off through a San Clemente side gate for a high-speed drive down the San Diego Freeway.

High-speed driving is a thing of the past now, and Rebozo is not present at San Clemente.

The aides who see the President most frequently are Haig, who coordinates the senior staff, and White House press secretary Ronald L. Ziegler who has become almost as inaccessible as the President.

But Ziegler has said often that the President is "a very private person," and none of the White House aides here regard Mr. Nixon's comparative isolation as anything unusual.

In fact, Haig speaks of it as part of a necessary process for Mr. Nixon and predicts that the President will speak to the public in 1974 on many issues and will meet regularly with the press.

The President's priorities now are the Middle East, inflation and the energy crisis. It is Haig's belief that the voluntary efforts of Americans, particularly if combined with a Middle East settlement and resumption of Arab oil shipments, will enable the country to avoid gas rationing in 1974.

No one here, however, is predicting when that settlement will come. Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger is due to meet here soon with Mr. Nixon for a consultation on the prospects of peace in the Middle East.

The President and Kissinger have talked on the telephone extensively every day since Mr. Nixon came to San Clemente on a surprise commercial flight last Wednesday.

The accomplishments which Haig says the President would be widely praised for except for Watergate include the success in getting both Israel and the Arab nations to the bargaining table, "the successful transition from a wartime to a peace economy in 1972," a reduction in drug traffic, an inflationary spiral lower than other major nations, and a reduction in crime.

But Mr. Nixon remains confident, Haig says, that history will vindicate him despite the current preoccupation with Watergate.

"Richard Nixon is a great student of history—in personal crisis he turns to history," Haig says. "He uses that to keep his own perspective."

Despite the official optimism, however, there is a realization here that Mr. Nixon faces one of the most critical periods of his presidency

when he returns to the White House.

The White House view is that the House will not vote in favor of a resolution of impeachment on the basis of the information now known and that it would take a new revelation of dramatic consequence to make an impeachment vote likely.

On the other hand, there is virtually unanimous agreement that Mr. Nixon would have a difficult time surviving if the Watergate special prosecutor concludes that he was involved in the coverup.

"We haven't put Watergate to rest," says one otherwise optimistic official. "The President knows he still has a struggle on his hands."