SF Examiner

Nixon's energy crisis—nothing to lose but his grip

By Harry Kelly
Chicago Tribune

WASHINGTON — When the lines of cars around service stations were growing longer, a congressman complained an administration official had told him, "We have already reached the point to do something drastic about the oil shortage."

Do you think the last time Nixon made crackers in Washington, "we're worried about our image."

When you're down to 30 percent in the polls, you don't much care to lose, so you wise-crack when you're up around 70 percent. Have no worry about making everybody happy.

Is anyone looking for silver lining it may be cold comfort to Nixon. He has hotfoot plunged from the penthouse to the basement in popularity polls. He must watch his step as he faces impeachment in an election year Congress.

On the back of Watergate, the Nixon White House has lost much of its drive and rhetoric as well as its credibility. But is it also losing its grip? Is anyone minding the store?

When Nixon was flanked by John Ehrlichman and H. R. Haldeman, the White House was an authoritarian model. It no longer is.

Many federal departments now consider themselves to be more independent now, and some agencies feel they are drifting and that no one in the White House cares.

While Nixon is supported by some administration officials, he is the target of sharp by many others, some of whom display Watergate wounds in their eyes.

"If you compare the president's position a year ago to now, it's night and day. He was in the process of being built up and now is being allowed to slowly crumble away."

enforced by Haldeman and Ehrlichman would never have permitted the confusing public dispute between the White House and energy officials over how long the oil shortage may last.

[illegible]

[illegible] the President [illegible] advisers was [illegible] of Oval Office [illegible] that he signed a statement [illegible] a group of business [illegible] criticizing Nixon's handling of the Watergate scandal.

[illegible] wallowing like a rudderless ship, with truck drivers tying up commerce with a violent strike, with the oil shortage forcing industries to cut back and lay off workers, with an automobile-oriented society lining up to pay $3 for six gallons of gasoline, with service stations threatening to strike and the economy facing inflation combined with recession.

Or will [illegible] retreat into a shell [illegible] only to emerge [illegible] yellow-lined tablet and [illegible] pointed questions?

"If the economy goes bad with prices going up and unemployment rising, Republicans in the House might find it difficult to give [illegible] a vote on impeachment," said a Republican. "When things go bad people usually blame the guy in charge."

[illegible] Washington, there are two

[illegible] been hoped, particularly among Republicans on Capitol Hill, that once Nixon and Haldeman left the White House, [illegible] would be more open.

But a former Cabinet aide thinks the opposite has occurred, that Nixon had become more rather than less isolated.

He recalled that in days leading up to the "Saturday Night Massacre" Nixon did not see his attorney general, Elliot Richardson, until 4 p.m. Saturday, even though major negotiations had been underway all week and Richardson had threatened to resign twice. All the negotiations were conducted through an intermediary, Haig. That is the reason many believe, for the major miscalculation.

Nixon has maintained the arm's distance approach in dealing with the energy shortage. His direct involvement — as far as public visibility is concerned — has been meager.

Nixon has not center stage to Simon, [illegible] for the energy chief to take [illegible] more likely [illegible] both.