

Tom Braden

Post 7-18-74

An Administration 'Up in the Air'

President Nixon has gone out to California for a rest, and his fellow citizens do not begrudge it or deny that he needs it. But nobody is calling the rest well deserved. The last week was rough for the President but it was also rough for the country.

Just to mention three of the problems on which the President worked before he left for San Clemente is to get the dimensions of the situation.

First, the President held a meeting with business leaders to discuss the economy. Some of the most important leaders of business either weren't asked because, having criticized the President, they are no longer welcome at the White House or didn't come because they don't consider it good business to have their pictures taken with Mr. Nixon.

But picture taking was the principal purpose of the meeting. Nothing happened. No decisions were taken; no program launched.

The economy of the nation couldn't be much more worse. The rate of inflation is now double digit and is hitting hardest at fuel and food, which is to say, is hitting hardest at the middle and lower incomes.

The prime rate has gone up 37 per cent since March. Home construction, which declined 13 per cent in 1973, declined 30 per cent more in the first five months of 1974.

Unemployment in the construction industry was 10 per cent last month. It

will rise. The stock market has gone down 100 points in the past month.

For all this the President has no remedy and, in fairness to him, maybe there is no remedy. But the lawmakers here in Washington would like to feel that they are doing something and, under Mr. Nixon's leadership, they aren't.

The second item on which the President spent time before taking off was composing statements to defend himself

"The President didn't decide in favor of Simon; he didn't decide in favor of Kissinger. He went off to California."

against the evidence released by the House Judiciary Committee. The White House attacked the motives of the committee for releasing it. The evidence seemed to prove that at no time in the history of the Watergate scandal did Mr. Nixon ever try to help unravel the case. The committee's transcriptions of the tapes revealed that in his own version of those tapes, the President withheld several self-damaging statements. But Mr. Nixon's men were ready with a tough, hard line.

"(Expletive deleted), I want you all to stonewall it, let them plead the Fifth Amendment, cover up or anything else if it'll save it — save the plan. That's the whole point," said the President on March 22, 1973.

But when the statement was revealed this last week, presidential aide Ron Ziegler was ready with an explanation as to why the President had not included it in his own transcripts which he had described as containing "everything that is relevant."

"In our judgment," said Ziegler, "it was of dubious relevance."

Finally, on the President's agenda was a meeting with Treasury Secretary William Simon, whose power is rising rapidly in the White House and who, on the eve of a trip to the Mideast, sought authority to make foreign policy deals in return for lowered oil prices. Simon is opposed by Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, in whose province foreign policy falls and whose power is rapidly waning in the White House.

What happened? Nothing happened. The President didn't decide in favor of Simon; he didn't decide in favor of Kissinger. He went off to California.

Everything about Mr. Nixon — his policies, his administration, his guilt or innocence — is up in the air, and the trouble, as the President now vacations, is that the country is, too.

Los Angeles Times