LIFE EDITORIAL

Benchmarks to judge Nixon by

Everyone's doing it now—columnists, commentators, editorialists—measuring Richard Nixon's first six months. It wouldn't have been fair to judge him by his first Hundred Days, a Democratic form of reckoning: he proposed not a whirlwind of activity but a lowering of voices. He didn't even deliver a State of the Union message. In fact, his administration is so low-silhouette that it might prefer to slide along without setting up any benchmarks to be judged by. But six months seems a reasonable testing period: people are in place, on-the-job training is over. So a few judgments are in order, much as Nixon himself might set out the topics on one of his favorite yellow legal pads.

Popularity

Now at a steady Gallup level of 63. Quite good for a 43%-of-the-electorate President, even allowing for the tolerance the electorate always grants the new man on the job.

The Big Issues

There are three, two of which he has given high priority.

FOREIGN POLICY: Nixon's determination to phase out of Vietnam is now clear. His effort to negotiate with the Communists, to bring the Thieu government around, and to withdraw troops over a two-year period in any case is an intricate maneuver which has been conducted so far with considerable skill.

Less evident, but also on his mind, is his commendable resolve to reach some kind of an arms limitation agreement with the Soviet Union, and even if possible an understanding with China. This is not conventional Republican thinking (though it was Eisenhower's), and if it can be done at all, is conceivably best achieved by a Republican.

INFLATION: He has pursued a hard line and steady course, except for a few verbal wobbles by Treasury Secretary Kennedy. The trick is to avoid a recession and too much unemployment. Good marks so far.

DOMESTIC UNREST: Nixon began by wanting federal action against campus rioters, but thought better of it and got such a bill killed.

With Negroes he gives the impression he's not much involved; regards them politically as not to be won over and only hopes they won't be too troublesome while he assembles his Middle America majority. He has retreated on school desegregation and voting rights. "You will be better advised to watch what we do instead of what we say," Attorney General Mitchell told a group of blacks. An odd remark: meaning the rhetoric will be for Strom Thurmond but the behavior not too unacceptable to Negroes?

In the cities the first half of the hot summer has passed in welcome quiet. One Cabinet member credits this to existing ghetto programs "draining away the passion." It is also possible that an enigmatic Administration in Washington plus the "law and order" victories in several municipal elections had in fact had a cooling effect. But when so temperate a black leader as Roy Wilkins says that Nixon's stand on desegregation guidelines is almost enough "to make you vomit," then it does seem that trouble is building here.

Congress

The President has asked for little and got less.

Granted that Democrats do and Republicans undo (at least that's what each promises), the Nixon program has been astonishing for a minimum of requests and an ineptitude in persuasion. By this time Kennedy had 22 legislative requests adopted, and Eisenhower had 11. Of course Nixon succeeds the legislatingest President since F.D.R. and can argue that a period of digestion is wanted. But Nixon has yet to get through even his first two major requests—the surcharge extension and the ABM, which have become centers of controversy. On Capitol Hill the natives are restless.

Appointments

Good men seem hard to find. The best are Henry Kissinger as chief foreign policy adviser (exercising an unprecedented ascendancy which seems not to trouble the urbane Secretary of State Rogers) and Professors Burns and McCracken in economics.

Nixon critics thought they had found easy targets, first in Spiro Agnew then in Wally Hickel, but both have become more prudent of tongue, and the new heavy is Attorney General Mitchell, a dour, taciturn man who favors tougher law enforcement procedures and seems to be Nixon's favorite conservative counselor. The most popular appointee, Robert Finch, is working his way out from under a cloud.

On the whole the Cabinet comes across earnest, guarded, undistinguished. Either by temperament or by environmental sensitivity, they make no waves.

Style

"Better than expected" was almost a universal response to Nixon's first months. In this reaction he had the advantage of all the earlier public concentration on his defects. The partisan Nixon has been muted, the man with the instinct for the jugular is not even to be seen. Decorum and respectability have been restored to the White House, though it's a good question whether the White House is a proper place for religious services (what's wrong with a President taking his family off to church?). The new atmosphere obviously satisfies many Americans, though others find Nixon, in the idiom of the young, a plastic man.

In press conferences, as in private conversations with leaders abroad, the President impresses by the thoroughness of his preparation, a lawyer's gift for orderly exposition and the practiced control of his feelings. Perhaps the salient public discovery about Richard Nixon is how much he, in the gregarious game of politics, is what his friend Finch calls "a solitary." Even friends among his advisers seem to be valued not so much as companions but as guides who provide tidy summaries of possible courses of action. These recommendations will then in privacy be weighed by the President for feasibility, cost and advantage; political fallout will be nicely calibrated and strategies of action decided. The result appears managerial, efficient and intelligent; but some congressmen now suspect (and judge by the backdown over the Knowles appointment) that the process also betrays indecisiveness.

Nixon is gifted as a debater but is not naturally eloquent, and remains in character by preferring a serviceable plainness in his speechwriters. He has said nothing particularly memorable nor can he be taxed with arousing hopes he will not satisfy. He and his colleagues are not the sort who are engagingly anecdotal. This may not be fatal to a Presidency, and for a time may even be a relief to the public. Nixon was at first praised simply for not being as L.B.J. was, but will now be measured for what he himself is.

Goals and Leadership

Campaigning, Richard Nixon thought we needed "a time of healing, of renewal and of realistic hope." Temperatures have indeed lowered, a condition to be credited in part to him, in part to the same impulses in the body politic that made his election, but not George Wallace's, possible. And should he succeed in ending the war in Vietnam and stopping inflation at home, he will have achieved a great deal, and will be deservedly formidable as a candidate in 1972. (Nixon blames his own earlier defeat by John Kennedy not on the debates but on an economic dip in October 1960 which Ike would not act to forestall, despite Professor Burns's warnings and Nixon's urgings.)

The doubt that hangs over President Nixon's performance is the amount of vision and resolve he brings to what most troubles a disturbed American society. Nixon has said that the day of the passive President belongs to a simpler past: "he must articulate the nation's values, define its goals, and marshal its will." The great ones are judged that way; Nixon's Presidency so far lacks this quality.