Life 3-6-70

The Presidency / by Hugh Sidey

Dead silence on human rights

Life within the White House has seldom been so full and joyous. Day after day the guests have come and clutched the hem of power, most of them convinced that Richard Nixon has established a new aura of warmth and graciousness. They have said farewell to General Lewis B. Hershey, retiring as director of the draft. They have lifted a glass of Dom Pérignon 1962 to Andrew Wyeth and his magnificent art, $2 million of which was hung in the East Room. They have helped Tricia celebrate her 24th birthday at Camp David and attended, at the White House, a whole imported Broadway production (*1776*) that livened a slow Sunday night as never before. For France's President Georges Pompidou there were guns and bands on the sun-drenched South Lawn, and in the evening some exquisite *contre-filet de boeuf aux cèpes* served with Château Ausone 1962 and followed by Singer Peggy Lee.

With newfound ease and wit, the President presided over it all. Explaining how the first residents of the White House, the John Adamses, had disliked it, he observed that "No Bostonian wanted to come to Washington . . . well, not then."

White House domestic czar John Ehrlichman felt so much at ease about his domain that he took a week in Sun Valley and reappeared lean and bronzed. Aide Peter Flanigan sported a cast on his leg, a badge of courage of sorts from Vail in Colorado. Political operative Harry Dent could and did brandish the public opinion polls and proclaim that Richard Nixon possessed the nation.

Yet in spite of the joyful mood, there was in fact genuine concern along the Potomac about the state of presidential leadership last week. The concern involved the question of human rights, spotlighted now by the school integration problem. While Nixon talked in his glittering evenings about the American "quality of spirit," the stark fact was that just when the nation demanded moral leadership from the President on the most crucial human problem we face, almost none was forthcoming. The void was allowed to fill with the babble of Vice President Spiro Agnew. And in the background, corroborating, were Attorney General John Mitchell's delaying actions on school integration, such Administration moves as the squeeze-out of HEW civil rights boss Leon Panetta and the nomination of G. Harrold Carswell to the Supreme Court. The result was more mood than fact, but still unpleasantly easy to read.

There is a singular parallel. Lyndon Johnson, who wanted to make his mark in domestic matters, equivocated and deceived about Vietnam and lost the country. Nixon, who perceives himself to be a President of world affairs, may be following the Johnson path to another disaster, this one on race. "The President is the American people's one authentic trumpet," says Historian Clinton Rossiter, "and he has no higher duty than to give a clear and certain sound." In critical hours like these, words become deeds. There are none.

It is plain that Nixon has a Southern strategy. The nomination of Carswell, who has literally nothing to recommend him except his presumed acceptability to the South, was the clincher. So quietly has the President pursued this strategy, however, or allowed it to proceed while he dealt with the matters (Vietnam, inflation) he considered to be more deserving of his attention, that even Carswell almost went down the nation's craw without sticking. Senator Ribicoff's support of the Stennis amendment, whose effect will be to take integration pressure off the South, suddenly drew public attention to the President's position.

This position is practically invisible. Nixon has hardly any black friends or advisers. No Negroes are in the Cabinet or even in the prominent White House positions. Black capitalism is a disappointment, the much-heralded Philadelphia plan for equal employment in the building trades is languishing. The terrible facts of life in the ghettos, where millions of children are being mangled in body and mind, seldom interrupt the bubbling White House proceedings, or so it seems from the outside. Oddly, Nixon, who had to contend with "the system," fighting his way upward from a poor boyhood, displays no communion with those now trapped by it. Lyndon Johnson, for all his mighty posturing, never totally lost this sense of contact.

Such a judgment of Nixon may be unfair. His concern might be more profound than anyone knows. He may have become convinced that school integration is a failure or that the approach to all integration must be slowed to preserve our society. But unless such a belief is given voice, or publicly denied, the nation must conclude that some conviction or courage is wanting.

It is argued with some fervor that Nixon is in total tune with the politics of the hour. Perhaps. But history suggests that people have a habit of turning bitterly against leaders who let them have their way and refuse to face problems when they should be faced. The lack of forthrightness ultimately harvests contempt from all sides.

Even within the White House family there are those who are deeply distressed by the impression of inaction or wrong action being conveyed. Men like George Romney and Bob Finch don't know where Nixon stands and they worry about it. Last week he delivered a major speech before 45 U.S. governors meeting in Washington, most of them men deeply interested in knowing his attitude toward school integration, and never once mentioned the subject. Perhaps he will soon speak out. Grover Cleveland, who in urging lower tariffs in 1887 faced the gale himself, left some of the best advice: "What's the use of being elected or reelected unless you stand for something?"