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Nixon's Survival at Stake

At this point in the Watergate drama — with the reconvening of the Ervin Committee to hear the testimony of John W. Dean III — it is apparent that President Nixon has had a couple of good weeks, in which he has fought his accusers to a standstill.

The momentum of the Watergate revelations, which a month ago seemed so certain to sweep away the White House in its entirety, has stopped at the door to the Oval office. Nixon's ability, that he knew nothing, has held up surprisingly well.

Of course, it's a strange alibi for the head of a big organization, any organization, but especially the United States government. Suppose the President said he's terribly sorry, but he didn't know the SAC commander was planning to drop an atomic bomb on Moscow, or the Army chief of staff had deployed his troops for an amphibious assault on Peking. Would we agree that ignorance is innocence?

Much as the assertions of the Jeb Magruder and Maurice Stanses and Hugh Sloans challenge credulity, we have got to acknowledge that no one has established — in a manner that satisfies judicial standards — a nexus between the President and either the Watergate crimes or the subsequent cover-ups.

And as long as Nixon insists that he will not take the rap for the men he appointed to office — and law, if not the traditions of good government, presumably allows him to do this — then there will be no impeachment or resignation, and he will continue to function as chief executive.

In the last few weeks, in fact, Nixon has put a rather upbeat face on the presidency. I have marveled at how well he looks in his photographs. His nervous system

seems to be quite intact. Whatever the trepidations in his gut, he is putting on a good show.

Indeed, he seems to have regained some lost ground. Certainly, Melvin Laird's willingness to join the White House staff has helped. Right or wrong, the reasoning inevitably goes that, if a smart and ambitious politician like Laird is willing to sign on at this point, then Nixon must have a presidential future.

The Brezhnev visit went smoothly. To be sure, not much was accomplished, but Nixon didn't need much accomplishment. As a summit, this one was strictly public relations, for both of the principals. Nixon needed to convey the impression that he still was in charge — and he did.

Substantively, his major undertaking in recent weeks was the announcement of Phase 4. The economists sneered that it was bad economics, the businessmen dismissed it as too little, too late, the journalists insisted it was only politics. But everyone agreed it was better than drift — and that the President seemed to be doing something again.

All of this recent flurry, however, does not change the essential truth. The generals will salute, the bureaucrats will fawn and the ambassadors will click their heels when summoned. But as long as Richard Nixon remains in the White House, he will be a lame duck.

The great offensive power that he brought to the presidency in January has been spent. With Congress rejuvenated, the conservative counter-revolution that Nixon promised is dead. The days of unchallenged impoundments, irreversible

veto and unilateral initiatives in foreign policy probably are over. A president who does not have the confidence of the country cannot, whatever his temperament, be a strong president — and on Watergate, Nixon squandered the confidence he had earned.

The question now, of course, is whether he can keep his carefully constructed lines unbreached, as men who worked closer to him than any previous witnesses are called upon by the Senate to testify. His survival depends on it.

So far, it appears that the Good Germans, H. R. Haldeman and John Ehrlichman, are willing to go down to their dooms shouting, "Heil to the Chief." But what about John Mitchell, our once attorney general, who was a pretty big man before he met Nixon? Their ties were not of personal faith but of mutual convenience. Mitchell may be quite unwilling to spend his remaining days as a well-behaved jailbird.

At the moment, however, John W. Dean III is the key man. The White House tried and failed conspicuously to destroy him in advance. The rumors of what he knows are ominous. He could leave the Nixon defenses in shambles. Indeed, if he gets over the threshold into the Oval Office, we'd better get ready for a new president.