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Mr. Nixon: Teaming Up With the Teamsters

President Nixon's wholesale adoption of the Teamsters Union position in his hard line against the strike of independent truckers, a policy showing the enduring imprint of Charles W. Colson, threatened disastrous economic consequences which were only narrowly averted last week.

Ex-presidential aide Colson, whose biggest client in private practice is the Teamsters Union, maintains deep backstage influence at the Labor Department. Hence, Chuck Colson's fine hand was obvious in Secretary of Labor Peter Brennan's blast at striking truckers which nearly collapsed the fragile negotiations.

But beyond Brennan, Mr. Nixon himself, in dealing with a grave national emergency, maintained inflexible allegiance to the one big union still supporting him. Following the Teamsters line, Mr. Nixon avoided negotiations with the independents, endangered the talks once they began and then failed to help sell the settlement to skeptical truckers. Nothing could better demonstrate Nixon-Colson hard-line politics and its inappropriateness for a President with 27 per cent national approval handling an emergency.

From the moment independent truck operators began protesting the shortage and high cost of diesel fuel, Teamsters International President Frank

Fitzsimmons viewed the problem as a jurisdictional dispute. With some reason, he saw a strike organized by the 250,000 owner-operators as a threat to his union's supremacy in the industry.

That view was shared in the Labor Department, where agents of Teamsters counsel Colson abound and whose secretary, Brennan, was hand-picked by Colson from the Nixonite construction unions. So, the White House rejected any formal government contact with the independents, preparing instead for the Pentagon to forcibly take over moving vital freight. That seemed more congenial to Mr. Nixon anyway.

It will never be known whether Mr. Nixon would ever have put government officials in contact with the truckers had Gov. Milton Shapp of Pennsylvania not barged into Washington. Although administration officials grumble that Democrat Shapp has grossly enlarged his role in the successful negotiations, there is no doubt the governor wisely forced the White House to talk to the truckers.

Still, with Fitzsimmons blasting "government officials" — obviously Shapp—who "kowtow" to violence-prone strikers, the Nixon administration wanted to stay arm's length from the independents. That became clear Feb. 5 when federal energy czar William Simon prepared to publicly dis-

close the government's proposals (in a statement which gratuitously commended the Teamsters, not even involved in the strike).

Shapp objected vigorously that issuing public statements was no way to bargain. However, if disclosure had to be made, he urged that Simon's statement commend the independents as well as the Teamsters. So, the following addition to Simon's statement was penciled in: we also want to recognize the constructive efforts of Mr. William Hill (chairman of the Steel Haulers Assn. and a key leader of the independents).

Whether Simon actually agreed to add this commendation is in dispute but it definitely was omitted from the version he delivered over television. The essentially irrelevant praise of Fitzsimmons for adding "our understanding of the problem" in a January meeting was conspicuously retained.

The next day, Feb. 6, brought much worse. Brennan, reflecting both the Teamsters and White House lines, attacked "a few dissident owner-operators" as causing "this needless trucking halt" just as their leaders were negotiating with government officials. Shapp was outraged; federal negotiators were privately bitter that a second, more strident government voice had sounded; the negotiations were nearly undermined.

Even after a compromise was reached, individual truckers expressed doubt the government would fulfill it. Mr. Nixon gave no help. While leaders of the independents were trying to halt the shutdown, the President broke his silence on the emergency with words that could only undermine those efforts.

In his transportation speech over radio Feb. 9, Mr. Nixon added a few paragraphs—not trying to coax independent truckers back to work but vowing that "in no instance will we tolerate violence from those with grievances" and promising "no sympathy" for law-breakers. He mentioned neither Shapp nor independent truckers organizations but praised Fitzsimmons and the Teamsters "for their responsible actions during this period."

Indeed, the strike which nearly paralyzed the nation was not that bad, according to the President. "At least 80 per cent of the nation's truckers, to their very great credit, stayed on the job," he claimed. In fact, the independents comprise closer to 30 per cent. But thanks to violence and intimidation, the strike was nearly totally effective for all interstate drivers, with members of the Teamsters Union as well as independents pulling their rigs off the road. Not all the Colson-Nixon rhetoric can erase the truth of that.