

## Laboring Around the Vacuum

It was 8 a.m. and cold in the Maryland mountains when Roy Ash, director of the Office of Management and Budget, walked into Laurel Cottage at Camp David, normally the President's work retreat. On this morning Nixon was in Florida, and his troop of budget experts had moved in.

In his plaid wool shirt, Ash looked deceptively casual. He sat at the head of the walnut conference table. In front of him was a five-page agenda for two full days of work. "Gentlemen," Ash said quietly to the 14 men, "let's get going. We have a budget to prepare." That first session lasted seven hours. It was the same the next day—isolating the trouble spots like the massive defense expenditures, then hammering them back into place, billion by billion, even by millions.

Last Thursday, when most Washingtonians were just pulling themselves out of bed, Kenneth Cole Jr., head of the President's Domestic Council, was huddled with his staff in the Roosevelt Room of the White House. Steaming cups of coffee were on the table to help jolt the men to full alert. The Alaska pipeline bill up before the Congress was the urgent subject—how to speed its passage, shear off extraneous amendments. There was optimism in the Roosevelt Room in that first light, the force of the President's energy statement still fresh.

Not many hours before, Melvin Laird, Nixon's utility political aide, had been on the Hill, his favorite ground. His pace down the corridors was casual, as it used to be when he was a Congressman. His manner was as easy as ever—a minute to chat with almost anybody, a ready smile, total knowledge and understanding of the day's political tides. Beneath his bald dome was the mind of a fox. "I've got one job," he said over the phone, "to get Jerry Ford confirmed. I figured it wrong, we've run into delays and I'm getting some heat on that. It's not the leadership, it's 25 or 30 committee members who want in on the act. But we're moving."

Half a world away Secretary of State Henry Kissinger was padding up and down the aisle of his Boeing 707 in black leather slippers, coat off, tie pulled down, harrying his staff between stops with Arabs and Jews. The gaunt Joe Sisco was at Kissinger's side. The two drove themselves across seven countries in six days, from banquet hall to conference table to the Sphinx, and then on through the sky as if sheer nerve and speed could reassemble that divided world. "You must not take the temperature every day," Kissinger cautioned his fellow travelers, who were measuring every gesture and word (like Morocco's King Hassan walking Kissinger back to his villa after midnight). "We'll know better in a few days."

Back on Pennsylvania Avenue in the Executive Office Building, lights burned through the night in John Love's energy section as his frantic crew, in an ironic expenditure of human and electrical reserve, fought to bring order out of the energy chaos. Governor Love pulled on his Winstons and admitted that the country faced a real crisis.

All over Washington concerned men of ability and good will were coming together in a common cause, trying to reassemble the broken spirit and get things moving again. One vital element was still missing. The feel of a President. He is the only force that can finally bring order out of chaos, can weld the small circles of effort into the bigger whole that can lift the nation out of its misery and guide it back to confidence.

Successful Presidents have done it with their presence alone, with some special personal quality. The Roosevelt men still around town remember how his confidence infused his Administration and spread to a frightened country. "He feared nothing," Lyndon Johnson once marveled. Harry Truman's guts and good sense were a bed of granite on which his men could always find their footing. "The captain with the mighty heart," the towering and impeccable Ivy League Dean Acheson called the little guy from Missouri. And Ike's decency ran through his whole eight-year stewardship. "You knew you were supposed to do what was right," said a former aide. "Nobody had to ask what that was."

The continuing tragedy of Richard Nixon is that he remains a curtailed and remote figure, his spare hours given to faraway idles with his friends Robert Abplanalp and Bebe Rebozo, two men noted for their own mysterious aloofness from American society. Nixon's working hours are episodes of aloneness and removal, strung together by cardboard ceremonies. The pulse of the presidency is desperately weak. Either Nixon won't do anything about it or, worse, can't.