

MAR 22 1971

THE NEW YORK TIMES, N.

The President's Image

Increase in His Public Appearances Called Attempt to Improve Ratings

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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, March 21—

There is no real dispute here anymore that the quantum jump in President Nixon's public exposure, including tomorrow night's scheduled interview with Howard K. Smith, is designed in large part to smooth the edges of the Nixon image, to present to the public the appealing Presidential personality that his staff says it sees in private, to provide a variety of settings in which to explain his policies, and to lift his ratings in the public opinion polls.

But the effort, now entering its third month, raises two related questions: Has this forceful public display of personality been matched by a similar assertiveness in his private deliberations within the Government? And does it presage any change in fundamental policy? The answer to the first would seem to be yes. The answer to the second, no.

Reporters who try to inquire behind the President's public appearances are invariably told by his senior assistants nowadays that they have never seen him in better shape. He is said to be optimistic and confident and he is "tracking well," which means, in the parlance of the Nixon White House, that he is less easily distracted by small annoyances and is thereby able to devote full attention to major decisions and make them quickly, even if it means overriding the views of some of his most powerful advisers.

An Example Offered

The favorite example offered by his staff is Mr. Nixon's recent decision to try to control wages in the construction industry by suspending provisions of the Davis-Bacon Act, in effect allowing nonunion workers to compete for jobs with higher-paid union workers, and allowing contractors to play one off against the other to negotiate less costly wage settlements.

The overwhelming advice of his aides was that a better route would have been to impose a selective wage-price freeze on the construction industry. But Mr. Nixon warned that this would involve the Government as a third party in literally hundreds of wage-price settlements, create a precedent for similar action against other high-wage industries, and lead, in time, to an unofficial set of national wage-price controls.

It is also pointed out, for the benefit of newsmen wanting to know whether the President is as much in command of his official family as he is of his public appearances, that he had no difficulty countering a weak and indecisive effort by his Budget Bureau to cut seriously into military spending, and that he again overrode the advice of a majority of the senior advisers who urged him to accept the bargain on textile imports worked out by Wilbur D. Mills, chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee, and the Japanese textile industry.

Mr. Nixon argued that the Arkansas Democrat's maneuvers had challenged the President's authority to conduct foreign affairs, and vowed to pursue his own efforts to work out a broader agreement directly with the Japanese Government.

Heading Off Embarrassment

Mr. Nixon's aides also insist that he is moving more quickly and authoritatively to head off potential political embarrassments of the sort that bedeviled him during his first 24 months in office. He decided quickly, for example, against the appointment of Alan Enthoven to a prestigious environmental post when his political aides decided that Mr. Enthoven's long association with the Kennedy Administration (he was one of Mr. McNamara's original whiz kids) could, for reasons yet unexplained, prove embarrassing.

The fact that his two top domestic policy advisers—John Ehrlichman and George P. Shultz—had recommended Mr. Enthoven and even told him he would get the job had little weight with a President who

spent part of his first two years in office making, and then withdrawing, appointments of people who offended his political allies.

Taken singly or collectively, none of these actions would seem to provide much reassurance to Administration critics who hoped that Mr. Nixon's efforts to alter and soften his public image might reflect a new responsiveness to public complaints, and a readiness to make adjustment in his underlying policy. His decisions against a wage-price freeze, for military spending, and against Mr. Mills are all fully consistent responses from a man who has long believed, and still believes, in the capacity of the free market to adjust wages, in the importance of a strong national defense, and in the prerogatives of the Presidency.

The internal evidence that Mr. Nixon is now more determined than ever to stick by his basic policies in Vietnam, the economy and elsewhere has, if anything, been reinforced by what he has been saying publicly during his recent spate of interviews. While some of his aides plainly hope that these appearances will persuade people that there is a "new" Nixon, the President has regularly made it clear that his main purpose is to make sure the public understands the "real" Nixon.

Two Interviews

The firm impression one gets after reading his interviews with the National Broadcasting Company's Barbara Walters and The New York Times's C. L. Sulzberger—to take only two examples—is that of a man who is prepared to live with himself and his policies.

He told Miss Walters that he would not wear sport shirts as long as he felt more comfortable in business suits, and he told Mr. Sulzberger that he would stick by his policies in Vietnam because they provided the surest way to end the war without being defeated by it.

"I am certain a Gallup Poll would show," Mr. Nixon told Mr. Sulzberger, "that a great majority of the people would want to pull out of Vietnam. But a Gallup Poll would also show that a great majority of the people would want to pull three or more divisions out of Europe. And it would also show that a great majority of the people would cut our defense budget. Polls are not the answer. You must look at the facts."

In short, Mr. Nixon is taking to the air waves these days to explain his policies and, he hopes, win support for them. He may be trying to improve his image, but this does not mean that he is seeking to change his fundamental convictions. Any other view of the present public relations blitz involves wishful thinking.