



David S. Broder

Nixon's Wobbly Course

HOUSTON—The events in official Washington in recent weeks present a confusing picture to an itinerate journalist, viewing them through the shifting focus of local newspapers in New Hampshire, Pittsburgh, Detroit and now Houston. But there is a persistent image brought to mind by the confusion and conflict over China's admission to the United Nations, the Phase II controls, foreign aid and President Nixon's latest Supreme Court nominees.

The image is of a small sailboat, attempting to come about in a stiff breeze, to reverse directions while

staying upright in heavy gusts of wind.

The American government—and particularly its executive branch—is like that sailboat. The Nixon administration, acting partly on its own initiative and partly in response to forces in the external world which it cannot ignore, is attempting a major reversal of national policy in several areas. It is trying to change the balance of forces in our internal economy, to reorient the judicial and law enforcement systems, and to revise our diplomatic, political and economic relationships with other major powers.

IN ATTEMPTING to "come about" on all these issues, it is encountering a fact of life known to all sailors. The lighter the boat, the less weight in the keel, the more likely it is to heel over and come precariously close to tipping.

The Nixon administration is "light in the keel" and lacking political weight because of the weakness of its mandate. The violent wobbling of the American government in recent weeks demonstrates the instability of divided party authority.

Divided government is nothing new in Washington. It existed for six of the eight years General Eisenhower was President, and the country seemingly survived quite well. But Mr. Nixon is not another Eisenhower, content to furl the sails of government policy and let his boat drift with the tide.

Richard Nixon is, on the contrary, an activist President, with the goal in mind of altering the diplomatic, political, judicial and economic picture he inherited from his predecessor. But he is an activist President with a miniscule electoral mandate and an opposition-controlled Congress. His shaky grip on public support was shown again by the latest Gallup Poll trial heat pitting him against Edmund Muskie and George Wallace. While winning, Mr. Nixon again carried the same fate-

ful 43 per cent of the popular vote he had in 1968.

THE GOVERNMENT Mr. Nixon heads simply lacks the political weight to hold steady while coming about. Every time he attempts to set a new course, he risks being dunked. He agrees to the admission of Peking to the United Nations and immediately the boat tips so far that Taiwan is thrown out. He tries to limit American military involvement abroad and immediately the Senate tries to scrap the entire foreign aid program. He reverses course on economic policy, but says so so suddenly and tardily that three months later the economy still has not settled on its new tack. He tries to alter the judicial philosophy of the Supreme Court but swings the rudder so far that he can be accused of trying to demean the course, not reform it.

There is room for fault-finding with the President, the Congress, the United Nations and others, but the specific criticisms are less significant than the fundamental fact that instability is inevitable when a weak government—one lacking real political weight—attempts major policy changes. The ventures of the Nixon administration miscarry so often, not because of ineptitude, but because its resources are not commensurate with its goals.

That is why the picture from Washington is one of instability; why the stock market is suffering from nervous tremors; why consumers are reluctant to commit their hoarded savings; and why the off-year election returns and the political polls show such a cloudy uncertain prospect. No one is willing to bet much on a boat that is rolling so badly. Its decks are almost awash.

Those who feel politically queasy ought to ask themselves what can be done to make the boat more stable. If the 1972 election produces another divided government, with a Republican President and a Democratic Congress, we face four more years of governmental gyrations. The time to face that fact is now, as the presidential election year begins.