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Policy and Propaganda

By JAMES RESTON

WASHINGTON, Dec. 23—At the end of the year, the pronouncements of the political leaders in Washington sound like communiqués from a battlefield. The Republican leaders on Capitol Hill summon the press to announce that 1971 was an unqualified triumph, which is bound to assure the re-election of President Nixon in 1972, and the Democratic leaders call the poor reporters back to insist that 1971 was an economic disaster, which is certain to doom Mr. Nixon in November to the retirement and oblivion he deserves.

Even the White House issues an official 15,000-word year-end report, which proclaims that all is well at home and abroad and suggests that Vietnam, a \$30-billion budget deficit and the devaluation of the dollar are evidence of progress, for which voters should be grateful.

The result of all this political propaganda is fairly clear. It is supposed to convince the American people, but it clearly turns them off into disbelief and even cynicism. They know in their private lives that the problems of husbands and wives, parents and children, jobs and budgets, never quite come out as planned, and that nobody, cer-

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tainly no politician, has the answer to all the dreams, ambiguities and disappointments of life.

So when the people get a review of the year by Herbert Klein, the President's house propagandist, of all people, or even by Carl Albert or Gerald Ford which tells them that everything's all right or all wrong, they don't even read it very carefully. They assume, and they are right in assuming, that they are getting a propaganda pitch, and at the beginning of 1972, all this is a very serious political and psychological problem.

Nobody in Washington, even the conservatives or the progressives in the Nixon Administration, feels quite sure about where the President is going, and this is true even for the members of his own Cabinet. Overseas, Japan and the Common Market countries of Europe, cannot quite decide whether Secretary of the Treasury Connally's tough Texas tactics or President Nixon's more cooperative attitudes really represent American policy.

If President Nixon intended to keep everybody in doubt and off balance in 1971, he has clearly succeeded. The Soviets don't know whether he is going to Peking to make a new alliance with the Chinese, and the Chinese don't know whether Mr. Nixon is really aiming at an arms deal with the Soviets and a trade deal with the Japanese, and the result is that everybody is suspicious, including our old friends in India and our allies in South Vietnam, Thailand and Pakistan.

In short, at the end of the year, something is obviously wrong with the Nixon Administration's method of presenting its policies both at home and abroad. Like President Johnson, President Nixon is overstating his case, claiming and demanding too much, and, for domestic political reasons, presenting his monetary policies as the best ever, and his diplomatic policies as the means to a "generation of peace."

But it is clear to most observers in Washington and it must be clear to the President himself at the end of 1971 that this is not quite working. And what is wrong about it is that the President is claiming more than his record will sustain, and insisting on "triumphs" that serious people cannot see or accept.

He has gained considerable support by being flexible, and reversing policies of the past that were not working, but he has claimed too much for his new policies, and has created even more doubt in the process.

At no time since the last war has there been so much private criticism of a President in the allied embassies in Washington as there is now, or so much doubt about where he is going as there is within his own Administration. Admiration for his tactics, and his flexibility, is general, but even his tactical and propaganda successes do not create that confidence which is essential to effective political action both at home and abroad.