

Washington: The President in Adversity

By JAMES RESTON

WASHINGTON, May 5—In this sensitive and dangerous hour it would probably be a mistake to act on the assumption that President Nixon is determined on some grand new strategy of smashing his way to victory in Indochina.

The problem here is not strength but weakness. He is not "determined" about anything. One day he is persuaded that peace is within our grasp, the next he is convinced by his military advisers that his whole command will be in danger unless he expands the war.

The Role Player

One day he speaks with the uttermost sincerity about the sanctity of every human life, including the sanctity of enemy lives, and the next he sends over 100 bombers into North Vietnam. One day he proclaims the independent sovereignty of national states and announces the end of the era of confrontation, and the next he sends an expeditionary force, uninvited, across national frontiers, to confront the enemy.

This is a delicate and distasteful subject, for nobody can be sure what motivates any man let alone so complex a man as President Nixon, but the wild contradictions of recent days and weeks and the tragic consequences on the

university campuses cannot be separated from the character and personality of the President and it is therefore important to try to understand what we are seeing.

The Pressures

In recent weeks, the President has faced a number of disappointments. The inflation has not responded to his policies as he had hoped. It has produced turmoil on the labor front and there is far more to come. His projected budget surplus has disappeared, the stock market is in a spin, and this has alarmed his natural constituents in the business community.

Meanwhile, his efforts to end the war have also been a disappointment. On the one hand, he is under pressure from the universities, the churches, the press, and the Congress to get out faster, and from the military to stick or get out slower. And the enemy, watching him withdraw, has refused to negotiate in Paris, and the Soviets have sent their pilots and technicians into action in the Arab-Israeli war.

Mr. Nixon has reacted to all this recently like an actor on the world stage, each day playing a different role. One day there is Nixon the Unifier, praising the Congress, and the next there is Nixon the Scrapper, vilifying the Senate on

Carswell and Haynsworth, or Nixon the Tough Guy, dropping his "g's" at the Pentagon and characterizing the university militants as "bums."

The interesting thing about this role-playing is that he plays the Peacemaker and the Warrior with equal passion and outward conviction. He deplores the weakness of authority and the decline of institutions with as much zeal as he attacks the Senate, appoints undistinguished men to the Supreme Court, and invades Cambodia without consulting the Congress. In short, there seems to be no connection between his various statements and actions: he balances the books every day.

The actual facts of the Cambodian invasion are not as important as the mentality and methods that produced the invasion. The bombing can be stopped again and the men withdrawn, as they probably will be, but the capital is left with an alarming sense of doubt about what he will do next.

The best guess here is that he acted in Cambodia and renewed the bombing of North Vietnam in large part because he felt the Communists were trifling with him in Paris and defying him with their adventure into the aerial war in the Middle East. He would show them! Despite his economic and social troubles at home,

he would act, he would act boldly, and he would act on his own.

Besides, the President has apparently been convinced that Vice President Agnew really has uncovered a workable political majority for the Administration's war strategy and against the campus militants, the Supreme Court, effete Eastern snobs, and the Congressional doves.

A Time for Calm

Nothing was more obvious or predictable than that the President would provoke a storm in the universities, a constitutional crisis in the Congress and outcries across the world if he invaded Cambodia and revived the bombing, but he did it, this time in the warrior role of Commander in Chief.

It is a solemn moment. Ironically, the only people who can save him from the consequences of his violence are the students who are now so angry that they want to concentrate on more counterviolence. But who needs it. What is needed now is a few days of calm, serious talk in the universities about where we are after these latest Presidential spasms of caprice, and the careful and massive organization of the students to work seriously in the Congressional elections, beginning immediately, in order to restore an effective political opposition in the Federal capital.