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A Matter of Confidence...

From the outset of his Administration, President Nixon has had a problem of building public confidence in his purposes and leadership. As his hour-long television interview on Monday evening made clear, that is still his problem, and he is aware of it. He made himself available for the interview as part of his recurrent effort to sell himself to the American people.

Unfortunately, awareness and availability are not enough. There has to be a commitment of the heart or of the mind—or of some happy combination of both—to ideals and purposes which transcend the boundaries of personal or partisan interest. Only with such a commitment can the leader of a party become truly the President of a nation.

In foreign affairs, Mr. Nixon is committed to achieve a "generation of peace." In the view of many people, his determination is mortgaged to an uncertain extent by his vehement and almost mechanical anti-Communism (his attitude on Chile showing a refreshing flexibility). As a result, he finds the ground shaky under his feet in a crisis such as the Cambodian intervention because many citizens question whether his overriding objective is to make an advance toward peace or to inflict a setback on Communism, two objectives which can be but are not always synonymous.

His difficulties lie, however, in the field of domestic affairs. If Mr. Nixon has passionate convictions or deep philosophical beliefs about the domestic issues confronting the American people, he has failed to make them manifest. His enthusiasm for foreign affairs is evident; his feeling for problems closer to home is not.

It was surprising, for example, to hear him express dismay at the failure of Congress to pass his family assistance plan. He has conferred with the obstructionist Republican members of the Senate Finance Committee several times, but his public attitude until recently had been tepid.

Mr. Nixon expressed regret at the Kent State and Jackson student deaths and the blowing up of the laboratory at the University of Wisconsin. But in the days immediately following the Kent State and Jackson shootings, his indignation was exceedingly well-controlled. His tardy and stand-offish response to the Scranton Commission report and to the advice of Chancellor Heard scarcely bespoke a leader deeply troubled by the turmoil of his nation's young people.

Similarly, President Nixon has throughout his public career made affirmative statements about civil rights, but his attacks on busing and "forced integration" and his nomination of reactionary Southerners to the Supreme Court undercut them.

In short, there has nowhere in these first two years of the Nixon Presidency been the "lift of a driving dream" of which he spoke in 1968 and about which one of his interviewers pertinently reminded him. President Nixon cannot be faulted for his failure to provide inspiration because the ability to inspire is not given to every leader, not even every President. But he can be held responsible for making his words and his actions coincide and for deploying behind his programs the powers of the Presidency which are his. These are the tests of confidence. By these more modest but still demanding standards he is likely to be judged over the next two years.

...and the New Gradualism

During his television interview, President Nixon was guardedly optimistic about the economic outlook. He expects unemployment to come down, but he declined to say by how much or when.

However, the President did forecast that the average level of unemployment this year would be 4.9 per cent—and added that there had been only three earlier peacetime years (all in the fifties) in which unemployment was less than 5 per cent. With the Vietnam war still on and the military budget in excess of \$70 billion and probably slated to rise, it is difficult to see why Mr. Nixon persists in linking the present degree of unemployment to a so-called "peacetime" economy. In addition to giving unintended support to the critics of capitalism, who assert that it requires war for full employment, Mr. Nixon encourages resistance to further cuts in military spending.

If there was any surprise in Mr. Nixon's television remarks, it was in his rejection, not only of wage and price controls, which clearly he regards as unacceptable, but even of wage and price guidelines or a wage-price board. The President said that he has considered all those options and had decided that "none of them at this time would work." Instead, he said that he would proceed with an expansionary budget policy. He has apparently decided again to accept the assurance of his White House advisers that inflation will slack off, without the sort of vigorous incomes policy urged by Dr. Arthur Burns.

Thus, as the political wounds of the November, 1970 election begin to heal, the President is clearly pointing to 1972, when he wants the economy much closer to full employment and price stability. He is prepared to be patient. The downside gradualism of 1969-70 is apparently to be followed by the upside gradualism of 1971-72. But the cost to the nation—in unemployment and inflation—of this excessively cautious and laissez-faire policy will be needlessly high. Indeed, there is no assurance that, without a tougher structural attack on both unemployment and inflation, the slow glide back toward full employment will work any better than did the slide toward price stability.