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Poker Player's Gamble

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WASHINGTON

WASHINGTON, Feb. 2—There is an old rule of politics that you should never give your opponent a clear and easy target to shoot at, but President Nixon seems to be hoisting a new one every other day.

Target No. 1: A rise of 9 per cent in the gross national product this year to \$1,065 billion—about \$20 billion higher than the estimates of most private economists.

Target No. 2: A decline in unemployment from the present 6 per cent rate to 4.5 per cent by mid-1972.

Target No. 3: A drop in the rate of inflation from last year's price rise of 5.5 per cent to about 3 per cent by mid-1972.

Target No. 4: All U.S. combat ground troops out of Vietnam by mid-1972.

This is quite a gamble, but Mr. Nixon has always boasted that he was a pretty good poker player, which he proved against the odds in the Presidential campaign of 1968, and he is now obviously going for the big pot in 1972.

Washington doesn't quite know what to make of all this. He swallowed Lord Keynes in one gulp. He announced the biggest budget deficit of the century as if it were the first article in the Republican catechism, and he embraced most of the old Democratic economic devils like long-lost buddies.

The conservative Republican establishment was stunned. The Chicago Tribune almost begged for help. What do you do, it asked, when a Republican President proposes a record budget of \$229.2 billion with a deliberate deficit of \$11.6 billion and justifies it on the basis of Keynesian theories? "You certainly can't cheer, but neither can you be overly indignant. . . . About all that is left to do is sigh and pray . . ."

Well, sir, that's something new, and the liberals are equally baffled. For they don't quite know whether to welcome the newest Nixon as a repentant convert, or denounce him as a political opportunist, so of course, they are doing both.

None of this seems to bother the President in the slightest. The report is that he is enjoying the consternation both about his budget and his latest military adventure in Laos. He has been on the bounce in the capital ever since he came back from the Virgin Islands, firing messages at the new

Congress, master-minding the latest Indochina affair, whatever it is, and not telling the Democrats in Congress anything about it.

Even the massive air buildup over Laos didn't keep him from going to a big prayer breakfast at the Hilton here and associating the assembled guests with the appeals of King Solomon. "Give thy servant an understanding heart. Let that be our prayer today. Let us have an understanding heart in our relations with other nations and in the relations between races and parties and generations here at home."

Maybe there is some connection between bombers and understanding hearts and all these things, but nobody here quite seems to know what it is. What they do know is that Mr. Nixon is keeping the initiative, dominating the headlines, and putting up targets nobody can fault.

There is, it should be noted, a certain admiration here for this sort of thing. Washington is intrigued by a man who can swallow his own baloney, scorn the opposition, occupy a pulpit, goose the stock market, outrage Larry O'Brien, run a war and promise to tame inflation and unemployment all in the course of a couple of days.

But does he have the cards? Is he right about the G.N.P. or is he twenty billion too high? Can he raise the ante without more inflation and unemployment? And if the South Vietnamese, with a million men under arms and a big American expeditionary force, still need the U.S. Air Force to deal with a build-up of 70,000 North Vietnamese in Laos, how are they going to get on without the Americans later on?

So you can admire his bidding and still wonder if he's bluffing. He once wrote that Khrushchev would have been a good poker player because, first, he liked to win; second, he planned ahead so that he could win the big pots; third, he liked to bluff, but knew that if he bluffed on the little pots and failed to produce the cards, he could expect to be called on the big pots.

Well, it's not a bad analogy. Mr. Nixon has startled the capital with his opening bid, all he has to do to take all is produce the cards and hit the targets.