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Nixon Still Vulnerable

BACK IN JUNE, when this column recessed for the summer, we left President Richard M. Nixon in bad 'straits. The Vietnam peace talks were deadlocked, the economy was in the doldrums and Washington had about decided Mr. Nixon might not be good for a second term.

The June Gallup Poll trial heats, measuring him against three leading Democratic possibilities, Sens. Edward M. Kennedy, Hubert H. Humphrey and Edmund S. Muskie, and third-party prospect George C. Wallace, demonstrated his vulnerability.

Mr. Nixon averaged out with 41 per cent of the vote, against a 40.3 average for

the three Democrats, and 11.3 points for Wallace.

It was, to put it mildly, a shaky position for an incumbent after 2½ years in office — so shaky that heroic rescue efforts were clearly indicated.

In July, while his Democratic opponents dozed, Mr. Nixon pulled his surprise announcement of his scheduled trip to Peking — earning massive headlines and widespread praise. In August, with the Democrats vacationing and out of the news, he topped that surprise with the dramatic declaration of a New Economic Policy designed to halt inflation and improve the basic health of the economy.

WE NOW HAVE the first measure of the political success of these spectacular tactics. Mr. Nixon has surged from his June level of 41 per cent all the way up to a dizzying 42.6 per cent average in the Gallup Poll taken in late August.

Kennedy, Humphrey and Muskie average out at 37 per cent in the new poll, down a little more than 3 points, and Wallace has slipped less than a point to 10.6 per cent.

If this is all that the President can accomplish with the most dramatically staged productions that his show biz minded administration can concoct, then he is in worse trouble than we imagined.

The Gallup figures indicate that if Mr. Nixon astonished the world by turning up unannounced on the moon as the commander of the next Appollo crew, it might add about two-tenths of a per cent to his popularity. He could have done as well by swimming the English Channel as he did with his summer China and economic policy surprises.

In scientific terms, the Gallup pollsters must assume that any shift of opinion within the 3 per cent range falls within the possibility of a statistical error in their 1,500-person sample. Mr. Nixon's gain for the summer is well within that range.

The average 3-point drop in the Democrats' support is probably real, not a statisti-

cal quirk, but it's hardly surprising, when you remember that Muskie and Humphrey were almost totally out of the news during the summer, while Kennedy's publicity came from his trip to the Pakistan refugee centers.

Mr. Nixon has had the national stage virtually to himself this summer. In addition to his two television dramas, he has grabbed headlines by opposing busing, promising parochial school aid and swooping in to speak to farmers, veterans, football fans, and other assorted Americans in a dozen different states.

Now Congress is coming back, the Democratic presidential hopefuls are returning to the hustings, and the nasty, niggling questions that were overlooked in the first spectacular presidential policy announcements will be asked.

As Rep. Barber B. Conable, Jr., the able New York Republican, wrote in his newsletter this week. Congress will not automatically ratify Mr. Nixon's economic prescriptions.

"DESPITE the euphoria currently prevailing," Conable said, "I don't think it's going to be as easy as it appears. Strong presidential leadership is not politics-proof. Special interests are not likely to remain stunned to inactivity for long . . ."

The President has managed to take the initiative in foreign and domestic policy, which is always a help to a politician. He is no longer just lying dead in the water, a sitting target for all the Democrats' salvos.

But it must be worrisome for Republicans that even when he has been at his most active and spectacular, his standing in the polls seems to stop at that wretched 43 per cent mark.

That is where he began and ended the 1968 campaign. It is where he has been mired for most of his presidency. It's where he is now, even after the last two months of razzle-dazzle.

For a 43 per cent President, there can be no easy reelection.