

# The President's Tough Line

By James Reston

WASHINGTON

WASHINGTON, Feb. 1—A lot of people around here have been wondering about President Nixon's mood as he goes into his second term, and now we have a few hints from the President himself. The man is fighting mad. He has his second term and his settlement in Vietnam, and he has come out of his struggles with all his grievances intact. If anything, he is more combative and energetic than ever before, and he seems determined to reform everything and everybody but himself.

George Wallace used to urge the American people to "send a message to those guys in Washington," but now it is the President, apparently having heard the Wallace message, who is sending a message back to the people, the Congress, and his critics.

"Shape up," he says, with all the subtlety of a sergeant major. Get to work. Don't ask what the nation can do for you, or even what you can do for the nation, but what you can do for yourself.

His budget, his remarks about the Congress, his defense of the bombing in the last weeks of the war, and his claims for the "peace" are not appeals for reconciliation but defiant declarations of war. The second term was going to be "exciting," he promised, and that may be the understatement of the new year.

The text of his last press conference is a revealing document. The tone is that of a man who has won a great political victory and settled a war nobody else could end, and now he is not going to be crossed by all those vicious grumblers who abandoned him in the struggle and didn't even have the grace to admit he was right all along.

When he was asked whether he had anything in mind "to help heal the wounds in this country," he took a somewhat different line from Mr. Lincoln, and answered with malice toward some and charity only for his supporters.

"Well," he said, "it takes two to heal wounds, and I must say, when I see that the most vigorous criticism or, shall we say, the least pleasure out of the peace agreement comes from those who were the most outspoken advocates of peace at any price, it makes one realize whether some want the wounds healed. We do."

Mr. Nixon did recognize that maybe the Congress had a problem getting information from the Executive if his officials misused the device of executive privilege and refused to testify on Capitol Hill. Here he was cautious and agreed to think about the problem and make a considered statement on it later, but he asserted his right to impound funds voted by an irre-

sponsible Congress, and his remarks about granting amnesty to those who had refused to serve in the war left no room for compromise now or later on.

The amnesty question didn't ask him whether he was considering such a policy now but "down the road much farther."

"Amnesty means forgiveness," he said. "We cannot provide forgiveness for them. Those who served paid their price. Those who deserted must pay their price, and the price is not a junket in the Peace Corps or something like that, as some suggested. The price is a criminal penalty for disobeying the laws of the United States. If they want to return to the United States, they must pay the penalty. If they don't want to return, they are certainly welcome to stay in any country that welcomes them. . . ."

Many things might be said about this. First, amnesty is a very hard question which clearly divides the nation, but amnesty does not mean forgiveness. It comes from the same root as amnesia, it is an act of "forgetting" past acts. Second, he left himself no out for the future and even rejected the compromise of nonmilitary service. Third, it dramatized, like the savage bombing of North Vietnam, and some of his stiff budget cuts on many social programs, an insensitivity to people in trouble, if not an actual strain of cruelty.

"Certainly," he said, "I have sympathy for any individual who has made a mistake. We have all made mistakes. But also, it is a rule of life, we all have to pay for our mistakes." This is odd coming from a man who has certainly made his share of mistakes but has somehow managed over a long and remarkable career to be rewarded rather than punished for many of them.

Maybe all this merely indicates exuberance after the election and the Vietnam settlement, or one of the dangers of the open press conference—that sometimes it brings delicate questions to the fore at an awkward time—but this sort of thing has happened too often lately to be regarded as an accident.

Mr. Nixon's assumptions seem to be not only that he has been right on these moral questions all along but that there was little or nothing to be said on the other side. Also, that he has a mandate from the people for all his policies—never mind the help he got from George McGovern or the fact that the Democrats were re-elected as the Congressional majority—and that he intends to push them through. It is a bold policy, but it is certainly not the way to reconciliation.