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Mr. Nixon's Counterattack

NEW ORLEANS—Portraying not the self-confidence of a president convinced of his own rectitude, Richard M. Nixon launched a counterattack here on his legion of political enemies that even in the pro-Nixon bastion of the Veterans of Foreign Wars fell short of the mark with a sometimes painful thud.

"You noticed," a delegate to the VFW national convention lectured us later, "that no one here booed the President. That's why he comes to places like this, because he knows he will get a polite reception."

"Polite" was the right word: A thoroughly decent, unenthusiastic response to an uninspired speech that some of the President's own advisers felt did nothing to ease his agony with enemies or consolidate the loyalty of friends.

Yet, as an attempt to rally the waning Nixon constituency the speech here was an important one that placed Mr. Nixon squarely on the political offensive for the first time in months.

The President's first strictly post-Watergate political foray to restore the activist presidency that gave him a near record landslide election nearly ten months ago was tarnished even before it was launched. Thus, Mr. Nixon, for whom applause of huge crowds is singularly important as a political tonic, was denied those crowds here by the assassination scare. The Secret Service not only canceled what looked like a promising motor-

cade through crowded sections of the city but also disbanded a mass of voters at the Rivergate auditorium where he spoke.

Lacking that exhilarating crowd tonic, Mr. Nixon arrived on the stage at the Rivergate visibly nervous, unprofessional and trying too hard. He was escorted to his seat on the stage and took it quietly, with a shy wave to the packed throng of veterans. But suddenly, as though realizing an omission, he rushed to the podium, raising his arms three times in the familiar V for victory gesture. The move was that of a campaigner seeking applause and running for office, and the speech which followed it was likewise a speech of a candidate, not that of a secure possessor of the world's mightiest office.

To get on solid pre-Watergate ground, charging that Democratic administrations had plunged the country into bloody war and he had gotten it out, Mr. Nixon attempted to recreate the political atmosphere of 1968 and 1969. The veterans here found the transition difficult to follow. As a result, Mr. Nixon was forced again and again to milk his crowd for applause.

He claimed that "thousands" of Americans were being killed every month in the war when he became President but that, because of his boldness in using American bombers and mine layers, he compelled the enemy to negotiate a fair settlement and now the war was over. It sounded like the 1972 campaign, and the applause seemed only an echo from last fall.

So Mr. Nixon milked harder. If he had to face a fresh decision now he said, he would bomb the Cambodian border regions all over again just as he did in 1969. Again, the applause rolled over him, partly because his sympathetic audience knew he was asking for it. But there was no ovation.

Moreover, this attempt to recreate a political atmosphere in which Richard Nixon in fact acted strongly and wisely more than four years ago was spectacularly out of context with his present predicament. The Cambodian bombing has not become a truly major political issue, despite efforts of the antiwar bloc in Congress to make it one. Yet, it was the central theme of Mr. Nixon's speech.

The reason seems obvious. The Watergate-shrunk base of the new Nixon majority must be dramatically expanded if the President ever again is to wield real authority. To do that he must start with natural allies like the Veterans of Foreign Wars and other special-interest groups with limited numbers.

Judging from his effort here, the mission the President launched to expand his base may prove impossible. As one VFW delegate summed it up, his speech "fit everything we stand for in the VFW, but I am still waiting to get the whole truth on Watergate."

Therein may lie the hidden trap of the President's developing counterattack.

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