

# On Temper

By William Safire

ESSAY

WASHINGTON, Aug. 22—Do you ever blow your stack?

Of course you do, if you're normal. But if you are a President of the United States, and your stack-blowing is seen on television, you are promptly analyzed as going to pieces under pressure.

The other day, President Nixon blew: Moving through a crowd, he grabbed Ron Ziegler, spun him around, and shoved him toward a small but thundering herd of reporters, the way halfback Duane Thomas pushes his blockers into the path of hot-eyed linebackers.

Today, in his outdoor press conference, after a shaky start in which he seemed out of breath, he gained confidence answering a question about what he would have done if he had known a year ago about Watergate crimes: "I would have blown my stack—just as I did with Ziegler the other day." It was his most effective answer of the day.

The President is obviously under stress; the relentless television eye caught every nervous twitch in his cheek. But with the "Watergate press conference" behind him, some of that stress comes off.

The President does have a temper. He is not a plastic man; he is not a computer; he is emotional.

Rarely does he permit that temper to show. There was his "last press conference" a decade ago, at which he went through the roof, vowing later to never let his anger show in public again.

There was the time he referred to campus radicals who were throwing firebombs as "bums"; that was escalated by his critics into a Presidential characterization of all students, or all dissenters, as bums. Another time, after the Carswell nomination was rejected, Mr. Nixon issued an intemperate blast at the Senate.

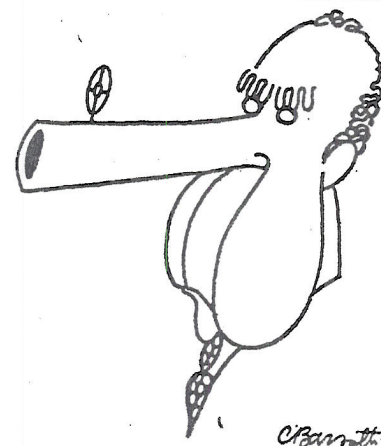
And now he has shoved Ron Ziegler into immortality. Considering the number of opportunities a President is given to blow his stack in public, Mr. Nixon's outbursts have been few and far between.

In private, of course, he has shown his temper to his associates as every President has—and should.

There was the time of Mr. Justice Black's funeral: He didn't especially want to go to that, but Leonard Garment and Richard Moore prevailed on his conciliatory instincts, and he went—only to be lectured at by the minister. Mr. Nixon's subsequent mood was less than benign.

The central question, of course, is not whether this or any President has a temper, but how does a President arrange for his grapes of wrath to be properly stored?

Presidents have men close to them who are under unspoken orders to not always follow spoken orders. When, in a moment of pique or vengefulness, a President barks an order or over-emphasizes a direction, these men roll with the punch, delay, bring it back



later for reconsideration, or conveniently forget it.

That was one of the functions of Bob Haldeman and John Ehrlichman, whose "wall" was perceived only as a barrier against those who wanted to get to the President, but was also a barrier against impromptu or ill-considered action by the President. Al Haig and Ron Ziegler are stepping into that role today.

Not all the President's aides were so hardened or so conscious of the need for delay and more careful review. Mr. Nixon has told us of his session with Egil Krogh, then 30 years old, a "straight arrow" who could be highly motivated to carry out what he considered a super-patriotic mission. Krogh did not drag a foot—he went out and hired the "plumbers" to do the job.

At other times, the President protected himself with mature men around him—Harlow, Shultz, Connally, others—who could be depended upon to take direction with a grain of salt. Because Mr. Nixon knew there was this safety catch on the trigger of his orders, he could indulge himself privately in letting off steam.

One of those safety catches has been the man who resigned today.

A couple of years ago, the President received reports about some of our State Department people in Laos who did not seem to see the picture the way the elected representative of the people did. Miffed, the President shot a note to Secretary of State William Rogers that said in effect "Fire everybody in Laos."

Bill Rogers has known Mr. Nixon for a long time, and let it pass. However, it was a direct order from the Chief Executive, so after a Cabinet meeting a few weeks later Rogers casually said: "Sorry I couldn't carry out your wishes on the Laotian staff situation, problem of replacement, that sort of thing."

The President gave the Secretary of State a funny look: "What was it I wanted?"

"To fire everybody in Laos, remember?"

The President laughed, shaking his head, "Hell, Bill—you know me better than that."