

Counterattack by Nixon

By Rowland Evans and Robert Novak

NEW ORLEANS — 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.

It was 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.

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 by an unfortunate incident 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 a security scare. The Secret Service not only cancelled what looked like a promising motorcade 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.

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.

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 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.

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.