

Too Late and Too Little

By Tom Wicker

IN THE NATION

When Richard Nixon and John B. Connally Jr. "discussed" the possibility that Mr. Nixon might nominate Mr. Connally to fill the Vice-Presidential vacancy, the two men never actually talked. Mr. Nixon spoke to his aide, General Haig, who talked to Mr. Connally, then carried the response back to Mr. Nixon; and so on.

When Mr. Nixon settled on Gerald Ford for the Vice-Presidential nomination, he did not tell Mr. Ford directly; again, the actual deed was done by General Haig.

Much testimony before the Ervin committee suggested that this kind of isolation is habitual. For instance, John W. Dean, the White House counsel who supposedly was investigating the Watergate matter for Mr. Nixon, said he did not see Mr. Nixon from the time of the break-in until Sept. 15, except for one ceremonial occasion. Earlier, Mr. Dean had not told Mr. Nixon about Gordon Liddy's "Mission Impossible" schemes because, he said, "I did not have access to the President . . . I had never been into the President or called by the President before."

That was in the old Haldeman-dominated White House, run on the Prussian staff system. By all the evidence available, nothing much has changed in the new Haig-Ziegler regime. Mr. Nixon is still a brooding loner, with an iron cocoon of staff protection thrown about him; from the White House to Camp David to Key Biscayne to San Clemente, his privacy and isolation from the world is rigorously maintained.

Not surprisingly, therefore, a group of Republican Senators, discussing recently whether or not to go privately to Mr. Nixon to urge him to resign, found themselves doubtful that they could get an appointment to see him. They feared they might have to deliver even that message to General Haig.

So, when Mr. Nixon changes tactics or even strategy, it is not likely to mean a change in anything so essential to his personality as his lone-wolf outlook. That is why there is probably less than meets the eye in Mr. Nixon's plan to sit down this week with all 234 Republican members of Congress as a means of trying to restore their and the country's confidence in the Administration.

This plan, of course, is preferable to the kind of retreat to the cave to which Mr. Nixon has so often resorted. But these meetings necessarily will be on a fairly large scale, which probably means they will more nearly resemble briefings than real exchanges

between Mr. Nixon and the Congressmen. All will take place in the White House, which will give him the advantage of the impressive surroundings of the Presidency.

Not many of the visiting Congressmen and Senators will have the personal and political courage to put Mr. Nixon through a real grilling; and not many will have the expertise in the intricate Watergate matter, with all its ramifications, to catch contradictions, conflicts of testimony, and the like. No one will have the power to demand documentary proof of anything; and there will be no lack of pliable Republicans to emerge and tell the waiting television cameras that Mr. Nixon's briefing has satisfied them entirely, and ought to satisfy everybody.

Therefore, these sessions cannot in any sense be considered a substitute for an appearance before the Ervin committee, or for a meeting between Mr. Nixon and its staff, or the special prosecutor's staff. They may succeed in restoring some Republican morale, and they may help Mr. Nixon's public relations, which need a lot of help, but they can hardly substitute for "full disclosure."

Besides, this new plan appears ominously in the Nixon pattern—too late and too little. Time and again, he has refused to compromise; then, when his hand was forced, he has done what he said he would not do. But having agreed, he has then tried to do less than he seemed to have promised—as when "full compliance" with Judge Sirica's order to surrender nine tapes turned out to be a willingness to surrender seven tapes, with the bland assertion that the other two had never existed.

Mr. Nixon could have been meeting with members of Congress all along; he could have started "full and total disclosure" long ago. That he did neither is bound to make these latter-day efforts seem suspiciously self-serving.

But maybe the boldest among the Republican politicians who will troop to the White House this week can make one thing perfectly clear to Mr. Nixon, even through his essential isolation and despite General Haig's hovering protection. Maybe they can persuade him that his troubles are not contrived by others but real—so real that neither public relations, White House prerogatives nor his unsupported word are likely to save him from impeachment.

Russell Baker is on vacation.