

State of Nixon's Health, a Dimension of

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WASHINGTON, Dec. 3—"As long as I am physically able..." This seemingly innocuous phrase, used by President Nixon recently when insisting he would stay in office, probably would not have caused a ripple of interest a year ago. But in the current climate of tension and suspicion brought by the Watergate disclosures, it has aroused a new round of questions and speculation about the President's physical and mental state.

For some time, Mr. Nixon's health and morale, and the motives behind his words and actions, have been a topic at Washington social gatherings, in conversations on Capitol Hill, in the departments and even in a number of White House offices.

The President's spokesmen have consistently described his health as good since he recovered from a bout of viral pneumonia last July.

Impact on Events

Every move the President makes in public is watched for clues as to his latest behavior patterns. Books and articles, some shoddy and irresponsible, are coming off the press purporting to psychoanalyze him. A nationally prominent psychiatrist who has warned of the dangers of any effort to probe a President's psyche on the basis of his public appearances said that nevertheless Mr. Nixon's health was a topic of frequent discussions among his fellow psychiatrists.

All of this is a dimension of the Watergate affair that has received little attention in the major news media, because of a dearth of information about the President's mood and the delicacy of the subject. But it has had an impact on events.

Because of the extraordinary interest in the state of Mr. Nixon's mind and in his actions under stress, the White House has become ultrasensitive to any interpretation of the President's behavior that might cast doubt on his ability to govern. And this, in turn, is shaping what Mr. Nixon does and says.

His current Operation Candor, in which he has met with Congressmen and Governors to discuss his Watergate problems, was designed partly to demonstrate that he was not suffering impairment from the months of pressure he has undergone.

Reaction to his "physically able" statements demonstrates the difficulty he faces in allaying suspicions.

He first used the phrase on Nov. 6, as an addendum to a nationally televised talk on energy, saying he had no intention of resigning and declaring that "as long as I am physically able, I am going to continue to work 16 to 18 hours a day" to carry out the duties of the office.

Mr. Nixon repeated the phrase in his televised appearance before the Associated Press Managing Editors Association in Florida on Nov. 17. He also said, "I am relatively healthy at the present time."

His two closest assistants, Alexander M. Haig Jr. and Ronald L. Ziegler, said in response to questions that the President's use of the phrase had had no particular meaning and did not imply any deterioration of Mr. Nixon's health. Nevertheless they advised him to stop using it, and when he addressed the International Seafarer's Union here Nov. 26, again declaring his intention to stay on as President, he made no mention of his health.

But the reverberations have continued.

In last week's issue of Newsweek magazine, the following item appeared in the Periscope column:

"President Nixon's attack of viral pneumonia, which put him into Bethesda Naval Hospital for nine days in July, was more serious than White House bulletins indicated. A top official recalls that Mr. Nixon was coughing blood before going to Bethesda and that his condition 'scared hell' out of his White House visitor."

Reports that the President's illness was worse than reported have been circulated by officials in the White House over a period of several months. According to medical reports made public at the time, the President had made a full recovery. But some of his assistants have expressed concern that President Nixon might have gone back to a full work schedule too soon after leaving the hospital and thus was under an undue strain in the weeks that followed.

Loophole Suspected

It was during that period that Mr. Nixon publicly shoved Mr. Ziegler in New Orleans, slurred his words in addresses and on occasions showed a shortness of temper.

In Congress and elsewhere, however, skepticism of the White House runs so deep that there is a belief that the President's reference to his physical limitations and the reports about his health are designed to give him a loophole in the declarations that he will continue in office.

There has been speculation by some in Congress that after Gerald R. Ford is, as expected, confirmed as Vice President, Mr. Nixon might activate Sec-

tion 3 of the 25th Amendment which says:

"... Whenever the President transmits to the President pro tempore of the Senate and the Speaker of the House of Representatives his written declaration that he is unable to discharge the powers and duties of his office, and until he transmits to them a written declaration to the contrary, such powers and duties shall be discharged by the Vice President as acting President."

That Mr. Nixon has given any thought to declaring that he was physically unable to carry out his duties as President and at the same time defend himself against the charges against him appeared to be pure speculation. But it is an example of the kind of thinking that occupies people in Washington these days.

Some members of Congress have been consulting medical authorities on their opinions as to Mr. Nixon's health and on the possibility that the President's decision-making ability might be impaired in the months ahead. Under the 25th Amendment, Congress has the ultimate responsibility of deciding if a President is disabled.

Dr. Walter Tkach, Mr. Nixon's personal physician, once described him as "one of the healthiest Presidents in history." Mr. Nixon himself has reinforced this view. In an interview last December, he said, "I've been blessed with a strong physical makeup. I never had a headache in my life, and my stomach never bothers me." It is important, he said, "to live like a Spartan."

Throughout his Watergate troubles, Mr. Nixon's spokesmen have charged that rumors about the mental strain on the President were "simply unfounded" and denied that he

Watergate Affair Constantly Being Gauged

has been under the care of a psychiatrist or psychologist or that he takes medication, regularly.

Several factors, however, have given rise to the speculation and keep it boiling.

One is continuous accusations from persons in high places that some of Mr. Nixon's decisions are irrational. After he dismissed the special Watergate prosecutor, Archibald Cox, Representative B. F. Sisk, a conservative Democrat of California, said publicly what many in Congress were saying privately — that the President's "actions raise real questions to me of whether or not he's thinking straight."

George Meany, president of the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations, put it more bluntly, charging dangerous emotional instability of the President. The White House called the charge "incredible, inexcusable and irresponsible."

Richardson Comment

Former Attorney General Elliot L. Richardson said one reason for negotiating the resignation of Spiro T. Agnew as Vice President, to make way for a new Vice President not under criminal charges, was that Mr. Nixon had "showed a considerable sense of strain" at mid-summer. This remark raised in political circles the question of how long he could continue to govern. The White House responded that the President was in firm control in all matters.

Every time talk of the President's health has begun to subside, some new White House action has revived it — the series of disclosures of missing conversations from the Watergate tapes recordings; the alert of American forces in the Middle East crisis, which some in

Congress thought was over-emphasized by the President; the confusion within the Administration over the energy shortage.

Another factor is the President's appearance and personal behavior. Here there is ambiguity that feeds the talk. Ever since the Watergate disclosures began on a large scale in April, Mr. Nixon has alternated between periods of secluded brooding and bursts of public appearances.

He usually looks better in person than he does on television. Some of the Senators, Representatives, Governors and others who have seen Mr. Nixon in his recent round of discussions have expressed surprise that he looked so well and seemed so self-confident, considering the circumstances. Some believe that Mr. Nixon has been subjected to more personal stress this year than any previous President, with the possible exception of Lincoln in the Civil War.

Others, however, note at

times his face appears a little puffy, that he frequently stumbles over his words, that his physical gestures sometimes seem too animated and jerky, that his tendency to ramble has increased, and that his displays of good spirit and humor seem like artificial gaiety and that in unguarded moments he seems unduly irritated and fatigued.

Some of his actions are cited both as signs of deterioration and of normality, depending on the point of view being argued — his private bursts of anger at his critics; his shoving of Mr. Ziegler in public in New Orleans last summer; his distrust of the special prosecutor's office; his restlessness that has kept him moving constantly to his Camp David retreat in Maryland or his Florida and California homes; his difficulty in getting out of bed some mornings and his playing the piano alone late at night, habits that Julie Eisenhower recently attributed to her father, in the course of defending him.

Some Nixon observers insist that in almost all ways the President was only being himself. Bruce Mazlich, professor of history at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology who is author of "In Search of Nixon," wrote recently that Mr. Nixon's "pattern of behavior is consistent and stable," that all of the traits he exhibited under pressure this year had been demonstrated earlier in his career.

Some of the greater signs of stress have been seen, not in the President himself, but in his staff. Mr. Haig, J. Fred Buzhardt Jr., Mr. Nixon's Watergate counsel, and others have appeared extraordinarily fatigued from time to time. The White House's handling of the Watergate tapes and other mat- inept by some in the White House that they concede a significant deterioration in the way the institution functions.

But the talk in Washington continues to be centered on Richard M. Nixon and the state of his health.