

James Reston

It's Too Soon To Count Nixon Out

Washington

THERE IS a widely held view here that President Nixon is now taped and trapped, that the courts and the Congress are closing in on him, and that it is only a question of time before the evidence forces his resignation or impeachment.

Maybe so, but this is too simple and probably misjudges the power of the presidency, the weakness of the Congress, the patience and compassion of the people, and Mr. Nixon's capacity to act faster than the Congress, the courts, or the press. He has made a life career out of disaster and he could do it again.

In the next few weeks, he will be in a position to dominate the news, not only with his State of the Union address, but with his budget, his messages to the Congress on whatever subject he chooses, and his power to address the world on trade, energy, monetary reform, arms control and peace in the Middle East.

Let the pundits say what they like, Franklin Roosevelt once remarked, just let me make the news. There is a difference now, of course, for the people and the Congress are tired of the appearance of sincerity and want the real thing, but Mr. Nixon still has the power to act, to appoint, to negotiate, to veto, to release facts in his possession, and even at this late date to demonstrate that he intends to preside over an open and reformist government.

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IF THE PEOPLE were determined to get rid of him, none of these powers would save him, but as most members of Congress discovered over the holidays, the people may long for a new beginning and wish he would merely go away, but they are confused, troubled and divided, and this gives him time for maneuver.



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No wonder then that the legislators came back here almost as confused as they were when they went home. They thought the people, who do not have the power of subpoena and have not read the record, would relieve them of the responsibility they were elected to perform, but they didn't get a clear answer.

Accordingly, Mr. Nixon has another chance. The State of the Union is that we have no union, no common view of how to get out of the pickle, no clear realization that moral corruption is worse than petty crime, and not even much confidence that any alternative would be better than the poor outfit we now have. Maybe this is wisdom or mental and moral laziness, but anyway, it is Mr. Nixon's last chance.

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HE STILL HAS many options. He cannot deal with the State of the Union without dealing with the state of the President. He could come clean—if he dare—and give a more candid account of the Nixon men and the Nixon system in the scandals than ever before; release all documents to the Congress bearing on possible criminal action by his associates.

He could come forward with specific proposals for fundamental reforms in the financing of presidential campaigns, redefine "executive privilege" and "national security," and suggest much stricter controls on wiretapping, and other forms of electronic snooping and computer listing of private citizens.

In short, he might offer to his own people what he offered to the Soviets and the Chinese: an era of honest negotiations rather than confrontation.

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BUT EVEN IF he doesn't finally seek reconciliation, he may still have the power to exploit the divisions and confusions of the people. He could argue for a quick resolution of the presidential dilemma in his State of the Union message, and request the Congress to order a national referendum on whether or not he should resign, and agree to abide by the vote of the people. He is a gambling man, and he might very well win.

This would clearly bring the issue to a head. It is not the best way, for it would cut across the procedures of the Judiciary Committee and the courts, but it would get an answer from the people and give Mr. Nixon a mandate to get out or get on with the problems of the future.

There is much he can still do, beginning with the State of the Union address, and the question now is whether he will approach it in the interests of the Nation or of himself.

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