

Is Mr. Nixon Still Calling the Shots?

Never before in U.S. history has a former President ever overshadowed and taken the play away from a new President as Richard Nixon has with Gerald Ford.

From week to week and day to day, the focus of the front pages and television screens has been on Nixon, while Mr. Ford, as at his press conference this week, is reduced to spending most of his time defensively answering questions about his predecessor and his relations with him.

If this keeps on, there will have to be a book on "The Selling of the Ex-President," for the former chief executive, even in exile, has demonstrated once again his mastery of the media, his behind-the-scenes genius for getting attention and his gift for keeping everybody guessing.

As always, however, the former President tends to overdo it, for who, in the face of all the clever and complicated deals Nixon has recently brought off, is likely to be impressed by the campaign to picture him as a pitiful, helpless figure who is so far gone mentally and physically that he no longer can function normally? Or, perhaps, is not well enough or competent enough to testify at the imminent coverup trial of his old associates?

No man could accomplish all Nixon has in the last few weeks without ceaseless effort. The success of his post-resignation schemes is ample proof that he is in command of himself and very resourceful in making the most of a uniquely difficult personal situation.

It may suit Nixon's immediate purposes, be they the whipping up of public sympathy for his pardon or paving the way for ducking the coverup trials, to inspire leaks, rumors and various

stories raising doubts about his health and his state of mind, but they don't square with what has really been going on at San Clemente.

Nixon's agents would have us believe that he does nothing but walk in lonely solitude on the deserted beaches of Casa Pacifica or isolate himself in the den of his \$10 million mansion where, in a melancholy Shakespearean mood, he all alone beweeeps his outcast state.

For the record, however, I have seen a list of the known calls he has recently made to old political supporters in Washington and elsewhere, plus the cronies, lawyers, doctors, business agents and family members he has seen, plus the aides he regularly works with, plus the conferences with representatives from the White House and other branches of the government. When it is all added up, one wonders how he finds time to sleep, let alone brood.

It has not been time wasted, for since his resignation of Aug. 8 he has managed to find ways of hornswogling the new President, thwarting the Special Prosecutor, finessing the Attorney General, thumbing his nose at Congress and bewitching the General Services Administration for \$850,000 in transition expenses. In addition, he has set up a \$2 million deal for his memoirs, based on the tapes and papers he is about to remove from the White House.

Those who believe an "incompetent" man could mastermind all these intricate and successful moves need to have their own heads examined. Finding himself in "disgrace with fortune and men's eyes," it would be surprising if Nixon were not in low spirits. Also, the phlebitis in his leg, which re-

curred after he received his pardon, must give him considerable discomfort.

Yet these complaints would hardly justify the uncertified hints that the resigned President is so close to a nervous breakdown that "anything" could happen. Dr. Walter Tkach, an Air Force general who was Nixon's personal White House doctor, flew out to San Clemente to see his former patient. He then quite properly issued a brief medical bulletin which said he had found Nixon suffering from physical fatigue and physical strain, "but he is mentally alert and has been working in his office or at home each day."

Since then, however, Dr. Tkach has followed up with a series of interviews and television appearances in which he says Nixon "is a ravaged man who has lost the will to fight." He reports that the former President told him, "If I go to the hospital, I'll never come out alive," whatever that means. He also says, "It's going to take a miracle for him to recover . . . I don't know whether I can pull him through."

Dr. Tkach adds that he hasn't discussed the former President's condition with Mrs. Nixon "for fear of frightening her," but the good doctor didn't hesitate to broadcast his alarms on national television. The Nixon family has carried on a campaign of its own to arouse concern over the ex-President's health, but that is understandable. It is troubling, though, to see a physician reveal intimate details about his patient and even quote his patient's most private thoughts. It is inconceivable that a reputable physician like Dr. Tkach would do so if he felt his patient would object.