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Watergate Stress Seen As Factor

By Victor Cohn
Washington Post Staff Writer

In January, 1973, President Nixon's doctor effusively called him "probably one of the healthiest Presidents we've ever had."

How did a man so seemingly healthy wind up on an emergency operating table 19 months later for an operation needed to save his life?

Several doctors agreed yesterday that it is almost impossible not to put some blame on Watergate—the events that brought Mr. Nixon down—and their stress.

This is true, most of them said in a series of interviews with The Washington Post, even if one considers only the fact that the former President, depressed, at first refused hospitalization in California after his resignation and did not take his anti-clotting prescription.

His condition, they pointed out, became worse during this period when—talking like the classic patient who has given up hope—he told his former White House physician, Dr. Walter Tkach, he was afraid he would not return if he went to the hospital.

"Any patient who has given up or is about to give up is a very poor risk," said a psychiatrist, Dr. Samuel Silverman of Massachusetts General Hospital and Harvard University.

But several specialists in psychosomatic medicine also agreed, in the words of Dr. George Engle of the University of Rochester, one of the most respected:

"It is well established on the basis of human and animal studies that people get sick at times of changes in their life to which they cannot adjust. They tend to fall ill, psychologically or physically or both, when they have major losses.

"I can't imagine any more devastating loss in a man's

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life than what this man was confronted with. From a position of supreme power, to lose his status, his worth, his friends."

All the doctors who said this and like things emphasized that they cannot speak with any certainty about the effects on a patient they do not know and have not examined.

Most also said, again in Engle's words, "It's important not to use the word 'cause.' Its not that a particular experience causes an illness. It's that it increases susceptibility to a pre-existing pathological process which may have been kept in control."

No one, he added, "knows yet what the mechanisms are" by which this occurs within the human machine.

Dr. Fred Goodwin of the National Institute of Mental Health and Dr. John Mason of the Walter Reed Army Institute of Research said emotions can effect hormone secretions which in turn can affect the clotting mechanism, among other processes.

Abnormal blood clotting caused Mr. Nixon's thrombophlebitis and the threat of more clots reaching the lungs, like the one that lodged there last month.

"We know that in animals with massive stress you can alter blood clotting mechanisms in the direction of increased tendency to clot," Goodwin said.

Again, they called this only interesting conjecture in an area in which doctors do not know enough, and some more mundane cause may yet be found for Mr. Nixon's disorder. So far none has.

Still, Engle said, science today agrees with folklore that we often sicken at times of major losses of goals, aspirations, traditions or values.

"President Harding is a good case in point," he said. "His health declined and he developed a coronary attack after Teapot Dome. If Mr. Nixon has been affected in the same way, it's under-

standable. It's like a Greek tragedy."

Dr. Eli Chesen, who on the basis of his studies wrote — from a distance, not personal examination — the 1973 book, "President Nixon's Psychiatric Profile," said that both Mr. Nixon's summer 1973 pneumonia and his current phlebitis came at times of "overwhelming emotional stress."

"I consider that all disease has an emotional component," maintained Silverman, author of "Psychologic Clues in Forecasting Physical Illness."

"Patients who are ill and deny that they are ill, patients who are ill and depressed, patients who cannot release their hostility, patients who indicate hopelessness and helplessness tend not to do well," Silverman said.

To all such conjecture, and the question, "Did his emotions play any role in Mr. Nixon's illness?" Dr. Tkach, now command surgeon at Andrews Air Force Base, said yesterday: "I can't answer that question because there's no way to answer it. What role a person's mental attitude has in his health is something you can't measure very well. You can find arguments on both sides."

He recalled that "I recommended to the President when we were in Salzburg" — last year, when Mr. Nixon with a painful leg was due to go to the Middle East — "that he not go because his life might depend on it. I'd have put him in the hospital immediately and we had military hospitals in Europe that were capable of treating him."

"He said, 'It's more important than my life.' He accepted that fact and he accepted the risk. What I said then was twisted around as though I were trying to make him look good, but I told the truth."

It was a time when many Washington critics were accusing Mr. Nixon of going to the Mideast to gain political capital to stave off his ouster.