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The Caretaker Regime

The events of the past week have made the Nixon administration into a caretaker regime. The President's personal prestige, already diminished by Watergate and the case of the White House tapes, has been dealt a fresh blow by the Agnew resignation. Mr. Nixon's chief achievement—detente with Russia—has been gravely compromised by the fighting in the Mideast. And the designation of Rep. Gerald Ford (R-Mich.) as the next Vice President only underlines the fact that the best the Nixon administration can do in the next three years is to rebuild public confidence a little while saving some elements of Big Two cooperation by putting detente underground for the time being.

The drop in personal authority is particularly striking. Watergate has already driven the President's standing down from a commanding posture less than a year ago to a position of weakness (only 32 per cent in the most recent Gallup Poll).

Two courts have ruled against Mr. Nixon on the issue of the taped recordings of his conversations and phone calls. If the Supreme Court denies the President's claim that he is constitutionally bound to keep the tapes secret, his lustre will be further dimmed. If the President then defies the Supreme Court, his political position will be well-nigh untenable.

Against that background, the resignation of Vice President Spiro Agnew after copping a plea is bound to reflect adversely on Mr. Nixon. For one thing, the President personally chose the Vice President.

More importantly, there is the way Mr. Nixon reacted when charges of bribery and extortion were first levelled at the Vice President. The President kept visible distance between himself and Mr. Agnew, thus confirming the impression the Vice President was under a cloud. But the President insisted the charges against Agnew did not relate to his service as Vice President, thus implicitly clearing himself.

Now, however, it becomes known that the charges did indeed cover the period of Mr. Agnew's service as Vice President. According to the statement submitted by the Justice Department, Mr. Agnew was in fact receiving payments as late as December of last year.

So once again there is a case of the President failing to tackle a moral issue squarely. Once again Mr. Nixon is

seen to have been running a tricky pattern which has as its only logic self-protection.

The personal blow would not be so grave except for the turn of events in the Mideast. Mr. Nixon, as he has often pointed out, is a performance President. He gets by not on personal popularity but on achievements.

His big achievement, of course, has been an easing of tension with the Communist world. But detente came up for an acid test when fighting broke out anew in the Mideast. In the first phase of the fighting, the Egyptians and Syrians did unexpectedly well. Their good showing gave the Russians a new opportunity to make friends and buy influence in the Arab world.

President Nixon, in a personal message to Party Secretary Leonid Brezhnev, asked the Russians to show restraint. By way of reply, Moscow launched a resupply exercise for Syria and Egypt. When asked to forego unilateral advantage in the name of detente, in other words, Mr. Brezhnev gave Mr. Nixon the wet mitten.

Not everything, to be sure, is lost. The President can make a comeback in public opinion. In that connection it would be particularly useful if he voluntarily yielded the relevant portions of the White House tapes to special Watergate prosecutor Archibald Cox. That would at least eliminate the prospect of an impeachment and leave Mr. Nixon able to keep the machinery ticking.

As to detente, big showy summit meetings are not on for a while, and the administration will have to compromise on laws pushing trade on a big scale. But the accommodation between Eastern and Western Europe can go forward quietly. If the President can bring himself to slow down development of major weapons systems, it might even be possible to continue a certain progress in arms control.

Even these limited gains will be foregone, however, if Mr. Nixon continues efforts to assert himself against the Congress, the courts and large elements of public opinion. And the choice of Mr. Ford as Vice President is chiefly interesting as an indication that Mr. Nixon has come to accept the severe limits that now hedge his authority.