Nixon's Strategy for 1972 Beginning to Take Shape

By ROBERT B. SEMPLE Jr. MAY 10 1971
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WASHINGTON, May 9—Without completely doffing the Presidential hat he pledged to wear after his disappointment at the 1970 elections, President Nixon has begun to channel larger amounts of his time and the resources of his staff to the political tests that await him in 1972.

And, bit by bit, the essential ingredients of a strategy designed to win re-election are becoming increasingly clear.

Publicly, Mr. Nixon is addressing himself with greater frequency and fanfare to elements of the constituency that carried him to power two years ago but have grown restless with some of the Administration's policies.

Privately, meanwhile, a skeleton campaign operation has been established in an office on Pennsylvania Avenue, and new faces have been added to the White House staff to help promote the President and his policies, while some of his senior people have quietly shifted their energies from the creation of policy to the task of consolidating Mr. Nixon's grip on the bureaucracy and merchandising the legislative agen-

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da already before Congress.

The most visible result of all this has been a month-long campaign to re-establish Mr. Nixon's credentials with farmers, businessmen, Southerners, advocates of law and order, and various ethnic and religious groups. This followed an earlier effort to test his appeal in a variety of formal and informal settings on television and radio.

During the same period, by contrast, he has devoted less and less energy to attempts to promote his Indochina policy or mollify its critics. Five weeks ago in San Clemente, Calif., where he drafted his most recent troop withdrawal announcement, Mr. Nixon instructed his speech writer Patrick J. Buchanan to keep it short and to the point. The result was a far cry from the emotional appeals for national support that marked his earlier words on Vietnam.

Similarly, with the notable exception of a long and unpublicized discussion between 13 Williams College students and H. R. Haldeman, the President's chief of staff, Mr. Nixon's advisers made little effort to open their offices to this year's crop of youthful antiwar demonstrators, as they did after the incursion into Cambodia last year.

This does not mean that Mr. Nixon is any less convinced of the correctness of his course. On the contrary, his senior aides insisted in a series of interviews, he is optimistic—and, in a sense, fatalistic—about the outcome of his withdrawal strategy.

They quote him as saying in more than one staff meeting, "Anyone who tries to make a political issue out of Vietnam in 1972 will have the rug pulled from under him." And, in any case, he is said to believe that any further major efforts to explain his policy would be repetitious or a waste of time, or both.

The fact that, after two weeks of ignoring demonstrators, he opened his own backyard to a colorful, canopied "Salute to Agriculture" is offered by his staff as a clue to his present sense of political priorities.

To summarize the President's activities and demeanor in the last month is to suggest where he feels he now ought to be directing his energies and also to suggest the outlines of a strategy for 1972. His audiences have been composed of faces he has always found reassuring—Republican Governors in Williamsburg, the Chamber of Commerce, the Daughters of the American Revolution, the leaders of the American Farm Bureau Federation in Washington, the men of the First Marine Division in San Clemente.

Both in word and deed, meanwhile, he has recalled some of the conservative themes of his 1968 campaign: a strong defense of free enterprise to the Chamber, a tough stance against the legalization of marijuana in his San Clemente news conference. When addressing any group on the subject of welfare, he has chosen to emphasize the work requirements in his welfare reform program rather than its provisions for a minimum income.

Over roughly the same period he has resisted the critics of J. Edgar Hoover, although there is evidence that he will seek a graceful exit for the director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation when the criticism dies down. He has announced he will review the war-crimes case of First Lieut. William L. Calley Jr., a move defended by his staff as a necessary response to national unrest and condemned by his critics as a political overture to the right wing. And, less ambiguously, he has said he would uphold the Supreme Court's recent decision permitting school busing while refusing comment on its merits, and has instructed his Cabinet officers, for both tactical and political reasons, to maintain a low profile in the enforcement process.

As for his potential opponents, both Democratic and Republican, Mr. Nixon has authorized increased criticism of Senator Edmund S. Muskie, Democrat of Maine, who has been challenging Mr. Hoover; while at the same time he has sought to keep harmony in the Republican family, and assure himself of an ally in his quest next year for California's 45 electoral votes, by giving Gov. Ronald Reagan what some critics think is an excessive amount of time to bring himself into compliance with Federal welfare regulations.

In the last few weeks, too, Mr. Nixon has taken a strong stand against liberalized abortion laws and has called abortion itself an "unacceptable" means of population control; his panel on aid to private schools has made a tentative finding that parochial schools need and deserve vastly increased Federal aid. And while there is nothing that resembles a coherent "Catholic strategy" emerging from the White House, there is increasing discussion of ways to tap the Roman Catholic vote and the President himself has long regarded Catholics, who make up 23 per cent of the population, as a strong source of conservative sentiment.

Behind the tone and tempo of Mr. Nixon's activity lies a set of basic political calculations. The first is that, while Mr. Nixon cannot lose points by ending the war and stabilizing the economy, he may not win points either, in part because the country is not likely to reward the achievement of objectives it has been conditioned

to expect anyway.

The second calculation is that the Democrats remain superior in the industrial Northeast, that even New Jersey, which Mr. Nixon won in 1968, is highly vulnerable to Democratic assault, and that the President must therefore make certain that he recaptures the affection of those who carried him to victory two years ago in the South, the Border States, the Middle West and the West.

The urgency of Mr. Nixon's task has been reinforced by the polls, which have shown a steady erosion of support even among the faithful. Efforts to reverse the trend earlier in the year by exposing Mr. Nixon to the public in a variety of newspaper and television interviews failed—the President himself told Barbara Walters of the National Broadcasting Company that there was little he could do about his "image." Thus, the decision was made to focus the President's energies on selected groups and issues, and that is what he has been doing for the last month.

In the same period there have also occurred politically suggestive changes in the personality and functions of Mr. Nixon's palace guard. The basic staff structure remains as before, with Mr. Haldeman the central figure around whom the President's other senior advisers on foreign and domestic affairs revolve. But changes in, and additions to, the public relations apparatus provide the evidence of a mounting preoccupation with 1972.

The catalyst for these changes was the departure of a young aide, Jeb Magruder, from the staff of Herbert G. Klein, the Administration's Director of Communications. A Haldeman protégé, Mr. Magruder was instructed to form an embryonic Citizens Committee to Re-Elect President Nixon in space a half-block from the White House and one floor below the Washington offices of the old Nixon law firm.

Several other aides soon joined Mr. Magruder, who had been a key figure in Mr. Klein's operation, and Mr. Haldeman instructed Charles Colson, a senior political strategist, to replenish the public relations staff by bolstering the Klein apparatus. Mr. Colson's first discovery and appointee was John Scali, the former diplomatic correspondent for the American Broadcasting Company.

Various others have been added to the staff on either a full or part-time basis to advise Mr. Nixon how best to use the communications media and reach the public. But perhaps the strongest sign of the President's belief that the time has arrived for promotion of existing policies, as opposed to the invention of new ones, is the sudden drop in creative activity in the Domestic Council, which formulates policy initiatives for the President under the direction of John D. Ehrlichmann.

Many of the interagency subcommittees formed last year to devise policy have fulfilled their functions (mainly the creation of the revenue-sharing and health proposals) and have disbanded. And, while individual staffers continue to discuss new proposals and initiatives, the essential business of the council today is to win Congressional acceptance of the President's welfare, health and revenue-sharing programs, an effort conducted by a small group led by Edward Morgan, a senior Ehrlichman aide.

Given the quickening pace of political activity on the part of the President and his aides, some observers here believe that the next logical step, and final confirmation of Mr. Nixon's interest in 1972, would be for Attorney General John N. Mitchell to leave his post at the Justice Department and assume direction of the campaign.

Mr. Mitchell has reportedly told friends he would prefer to remain at Justice, but observers here, including those at the Citizens Committee, believe that Mr. Nixon's recent rhetoric is merely a prelude to Mr. Mitchell's arrival, in September, to take charge of what is already a serious and sustained effort to retain the White House.