



Nixon Learning How to Bend

— Joseph Kraft

HE DOESN'T do it very gracefully. But President Nixon is learning how to bend. His latest appointments to the Supreme Court are only the most recent indications that when the pressures mount and all other doors are closed the President does almost what he should have done all along.

The most important recent example involves economic policy. The ideal for Mr. Nixon and most of his advisers was — and is — the free market economy. Their hope when they came to office was to arrest inflation by squeezing credit and government spending, even though it meant temporary unemployment.

But that policy ran into heavy weather almost from the first. While unemployment went up rapidly, organized labor and large-scale business worked in tandem to keep up wages and prices. After first stiffening in the familiar Nixon agonistic mode, the President announced his new economic policy of August 15.

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THE STORY of Vietnam is a similar story. Mr. Nixon has wanted all along the equivalent of a win — a non-Communist regime in South Vietnam.

That is why he has systematically refrained from making in Paris an offer the other side could pick up. But the American people wanted out, so did the Congress and so did the military. And under those pressures, the President has finally

accepted a schedule of troop withdrawal that at least points towards a final exit.

As to the Supreme Court, Mr. Nixon's personal preference has been to use the appointments for the purpose of conveying two political messages. One was the segregationist message. That explains the abortive nominations of Clement Haynsworth and G. Harrold Carswell.

The other message was a law-and-order message — a message of support for the state against dissidents and never mind the procedural niceties. That explains the nominations of Chief Justice Warren Burger and Justice Harry Blackmun.

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BUT ON THIS round the President's preferences were foiled in the most explicit way. The Bar Association, in a sudden access of conscience, stamped both of Mr. Nixon's preferred choices as unqualified. More important still, the Senate showed that it was prepared to block them. And with rejection certain for his two favorites, Mr. Nixon made his latest choices.

Lewis Powell and William Rehnquist are at least serious choices. They are intelligent and experienced. They have shown a feel for the judicial process.

The moral of all this is a mixed one. On the one hand, Mr. Nixon listens to his good angels only under pressure. On the other hand, he does listen. The system, slowly and creakingly, does work.