



Vice President Agnew: "Not one iota of new authority."

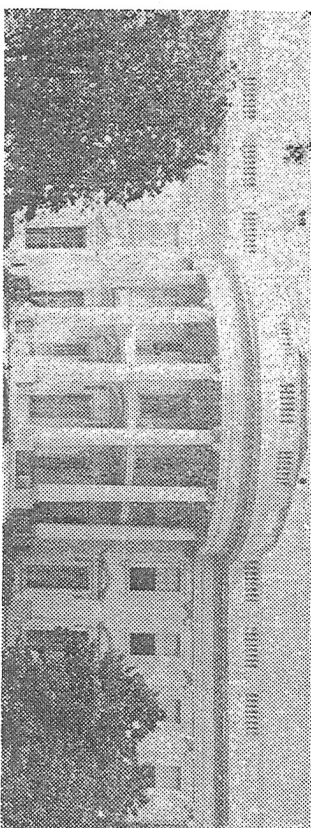
Twice during his closed-door meeting with Republican congressional leaders last week President Nixon performed in a way that raised fresh doubts about his understanding of the real impact of Watergate.

When the discussion turned to the best pipeline route to carry the new North Slope oil from Alaska, Mr. Nixon first heard Sen. John Tower of Texas and Sen. Ted Stevens of Alaska, strongly backed by Secretary of the Interior Rogers Morton, argue the Alaskan route was the only one possible.

But a powerful disclaimer came from Rep. John Anderson of Illinois, chairman of the House Republican Conference. Speaking for the Midwest, Anderson argued in favor of the Canadian route, with the precious fuel shipped to territorial points in the Midwest. Otherwise, said Anderson, the Middle West would continue utterly dependent on the East Coast for its fuel.

Mr. Nixon listened, then tautly—and somewhat tartly—proclaimed his decision: the route would have to be via Alaska, not Canada. The reason, he said, was embedded in foreign policy and national security.

Mr. Nixon next lectured his Republi-



Rowland Evans and Robert Novak

Business As Usual

At the White House

can leaders: You will just have to take that on faith. He could not, he added, go into the secret rationale of his decision.

For Mr. Nixon to cloak so prosaic a decision in terms of supersecret foreign policy and national security, following his highly criticized May 22 statement blaming part of the Watergate cover-up on national security, rubbed some Republican leaders present the wrong way.

The impression that the deeper implications of Watergate have not yet penetrated the Presidential psyche, moreover, was strengthened when Mr. Nixon made a frankly political pitch just before the end of the White House session.

In a rare but oblique reference to Watergate, the President reminded his high-level Republican audience that when he took office, thousands of Americans were getting killed in Vietnam. Not only that, he went on, there had been no sign of any break in the long U.S.-China cold war, and détente with Moscow was a remote dream.

Mr. Nixon's message was clear: get out and tell the voters not to forget what I have done for them in the past; don't let this Watergate thing block

their view of the real Nixon administration.

There are many such presidential signals that Watergate is perceived in the White House as a far less traumatic national disaster than most politicians consider it. Even if Mr. Nixon is merely trying to give this impression to his congressional leaders as part of his political strategy, the overall effect of presidential business-as-usual is the same. Whether the nonchalance is spontaneous or cultivated, Mr. Nixon's earlier pretense of trying to achieve a clean break with past presidential habits seems now forgotten.

Thus, the President is seeing far more of his former White House aides, fairly or unfairly entwined in Watergate, than even some of his new White House aides know about. Charles W. Colson, the President's top political insider man last year now practicing law in Washington, has been paying secret visits to the White House. Last week he dined with the President at least once, perhaps twice.

In this spirit, Mr. Nixon's pledge to elevate Vice President Spiro Agnew's influence by making him vice chairman of the Domestic Council seems to have aborted. Although uttered a full month ago, the pledge has not yet



Charles Colson: "Paying secret visits to the White House."

brought the Vice President one iota of new authority. Agnew told us last week that "there has not been a clear definition of additional responsibility" for him yet.

Further, the Vice President said that "I have seen absolutely no change in the President at all as a result of this" (Watergate) and that the Cambodian invasion and mining of Haiphong imposed "a lot more pressure (on the President) than the overflow from the Watergate."

Not everything Mr. Nixon is doing these days fits that pattern of scaling down Watergate to diminutive political size. For example, the President suddenly and uncharacteristically cancelled a full day of work and appointments at Key Biscayne last Saturday and flew to the Bahaman island of his friend Robert Abplanalp, apparently desperate for escape.

But such signs of inner pressure are rare. Rather, Mr. Nixon's refusal to face the press, his refusal to put politicians in charge of his White House staff and his refusal to disclose everything he knows about Watergate give the truer picture of the President today. Instead of any sharp break with the past, it is still business as usual.