

President, After Hard Week, Moves to Reassert Leadership

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SAN CLEMENTE, Calif., Aug. 25 — It was a week of strain and survival for the President of the United States, a week that is perhaps best summarized by a sign that censured Mr. Nixon in New Orleans and by another that welcomed him in San Clemente.

The first sign, homemade and held aloft in the crowd in front of the Rivergate Convention Center, said:

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"Nixon's the one, shame." The second, in foot-high black block letters on the marquee of the San Clemente Inn, declared: "The whole world respects you, Mr. President. Welcome home."

The signs reflected the intensity of public feeling toward a President who less than 10 months ago was re-elected by one of the largest landslides in American political history and who has seen his majority steadily slip away in six months of burgeoning scandal.

Now, for the first time since ousted White House Counsel John W. Dean III testified about the "cancer on the Presidency" called Watergate, close advisers to the President see an opportunity for Mr. Nixon to recover some of his lost leadership.

This opportunity is provided, in the White House view, by a combination of public wearying with Watergate and by Mr. Nixon's tough, skillful performance in last Wednesday's grueling, 50-minute news conference.

"He didn't blow up," said one aide after the Watergate-focused news conference. "He really showed them."

The fact that Mr. Nixon's ability to survive press questioning produced such elation is itself a comment about the recent strain and tension of the Nixon Presidency.

First, there was the long-delayed Nixon Watergate speech of Aug. 15, reportedly revised some 11 times by the President himself.

Then, last Sunday while Mr. Nixon was trying to relax with Chales (Bebe) Rebozo in Key Biscayne, word came through chief of state Alexander M. Haig, Jr. of an alleged assassination conspiracy in New Orleans, where the President was to address the Veterans of Foreign Wars the next day. Mr. Nixon was up long past midnight evaluating reports on the situation, and he was taut and distracted the next day when his motorcade was diverted from downtown New Orleans.

While striding toward the New Orleans Convention Center after some perfunctory hand-shaking in the crowd, Mr. Nixon spotted reporters who were entering the same door of the Convention Center. The President shoved press secretary Ronald L. Ziegler at the reporters with a shouted direction to move them to another entrance.

Some of Mr. Nixon's most trusted aides were surprised and concerned by this outburst. Deputy press secretary Gerald L. Warren was carefully briefed on responses to the President's attitude and mental outlook, and he conceded at one point that "there is no question that during the past few months there have been periods of pressure of the President."

The fact that Warren responded to the questions at all is more remarkable than the answers he gave. Usually, neither Warren nor Ziegler would accept questions which started with a presumption that the President was overwrought.

On the same day, presidential counsellor Melvin R. Laird said it would have been better if Mr. Nixon had been given more rest after a bout with pneumonia that hospitalized the 60-year-old President from July 12 to July 20.

It is widely believed at San Clemente that the Ziegler incident and the subsequent news stories about presidential strain prompted Mr. Nixon to hold his news conference Wednesday. Though Warren has discounted this report, many reporters had earlier been led to believe that the press conference was at least a week away.

Whatever the reasons for the change in timing, Mr. Nixon effectively used the press conference to dispel some of the doubts about his emotional state created by the Ziegler incident.

The President failed to clear up some of the most significant questions raised in the Senate Watergate committee hearings, particularly the question of why he failed to act on a July 6, 1972, warning from Acting FBI Director L. Patrick Gray III that top White House aides were interfering with the Watergate investigation. But Mr. Nixon showed once again, as he has many times during his long political career, that he can rise to the occasion when under fire and defend himself skillfully and combatively.

"He not only held his own but he came out and substantially improved his position," said Haig. "The President is very anxious to get on with the nation's business, and now he will be able to."

Ziegler also was optimistic. "We'll have press conferences and will be getting on with the business of the country in a very clear way," he said.

"The President has unquestionably shown his ability to respond to pressure but he's not out of the woods yet," said another aide. "Now he has to translate this into success with Congress and the country."

This sobering view, even though expressed on a not-for-attribution basis, may be one of the most important measures of the new reality in the Nixon White House. Gone is the euphoria of earlier months when some aides believed that Watergate would somehow wash away. The President himself acknowledged Wednesday that he has been damaged by Watergate, even while attempting to share the blame for this damage with his political opponents and media critics.

Also gone, however, is the belief of only a few days ago that the President was fighting for his political life and might not survive. Now, the talk is of the future and of issues other than Watergate.

One key Nixon aide sepa-

rates the presidential focus into three categories. First is what he calls the "burden of the office" in respect to foreign policy. Mr. Nixon's appointment of Henry Kissinger as Secretary of State is seen by this aide as a major development, and he says that the President attaches the highest importance to Senate confirmation of Kissinger.

Second is what the aide calls the economy and energy issues. This is regarded as essential for the President, who faces a crisis of confidence about food prices that could prove nearly as damaging to him as Watergate.

The third item for presidential focus is the legislative arena. Mr. Nixon is spending this weekend on reports about backlogged legislation, including the trade bill and 10 appropriations measures.

According to this aide, the President plans "highly visible" activity aimed at securing passage of this legislation and of measures on special revenue-sharing and the energy crisis.

Aides emphasized that the precise form of Mr. Nixon's actions has yet to be decided. More public speeches (though not, says an aide, "a speaking tour") and press conferences are considered likely to be among the components of the new visible presidential strategy.

One White House official said that another news conference, perhaps on non-Watergate issues, may be held this week while Mr. Nixon is in California.

Throughout the week in San Clemente, the White House displayed a more open side to reporters than it has at any time since Watergate first drew its curtain across the Oval Office. Such aides as Haig, Laird, Bryce Harlow and Anne Armstrong made themselves openly available for interviews. The White House senior staff, with Mrs. Armstrong playing hostess, arranged a cocktail party for reporters at the Western White House, an unprecedented event in the Nixon administration.

Many of the week's interviews were set up by Ken W. Clawson, deputy communications director who came to San Clemente for the specific purpose of trying out the new White House "openness" policy.

Despite the new strategy, which has already paid early dividends for the administration, there is considerable lingering hostility in the White House about the congressional and press pursuit of Watergate issues.

Mr. Nixon was described by Haig as being surprised that most of the questions at the press conference were Watergate-related. The President asserted at his news conference that, in effect, a double standard has been applied to his administration.

This belief is at the heart

of Mr. Nixon's declaration that wide-scale "burglarizing" took place during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations and there was no talk of impeachment."

Mr. Nixon is variously described as elated at the results of the press conference and annoyed that the press asked only Watergate questions. One minor reflection of his continuing annoyance came the following day when he left the compound for Red Beach, and his press spokesmen declined to provide the usual routine information of his departure to news service reporters. The supposition at San Clemente was that the President had decided it was none of the press's business.

Despite such lingering hostility, the President has clearly embarked on a new period of visibility and an attempt to publicly demonstrate that Watergate is, as he contended Wednesday, "water under the bridge."

In one of the most critical weeks of his Presidency he demonstrated under fire that he could survive. Now the test will be whether he can also govern.