

How the President set

UNIDENTIFIED flying objects (UFOs) are back in style, probably because the Martians can't believe the reports about the United States that they have picked up electronically. They have a point: right now the relations between the President on one hand and Congress and the Department of Justice on the other are straight out of a Marx Brothers movie.

There is no Vice President and, given Representative Gerald Ford's support for the great Nixon shoot-out, Congress is in no hurry to confirm him. There is no Attorney General and may God have mercy on the soul of any Nixon nominee — the Senate surely won't. Seismographs have reported minor quakes centered on Hyde Park, N.Y., and the LBJ ranch. What a mess!

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What is utterly baffling is President Nixon's loss of what once seemed his most potent political talent: his sense of timing.

He had a neat play set up. It involved using the virtually extinct Ervin committee to sandbag Special Prosecutor Archibald Cox. And, more broadly, bringing Senator John Stennis (who has replaced Richard Russell as the archduke of the Senate) in as an impartial umpire. Ervin was delighted, Stennis agreed, and the President had

apparently persuaded Atty. Gen. Richardson to sell the compromise to Cox. This would have left Cox in the position of taking the proposal to Judge John Sirica to discover whether it fitted within the limits of the Court of Appeals' thinly disguised plea for a compromise.

At this point the President should have sat back and read a mystery story, or even started a stamp collection. Within a week the following events would doubtless have occurred:

1) Cox would have told Richardson he wouldn't play; 2) the Ervin committee would be back center stage; 3) Cox's staff would have started backgrounding the press on Richardson's sellout; 4) the Ervin committee's staff would have started backgrounding the press on Cox's imperiousness (there is no love lost between Cox and Samuel Dash, committee counsel); 5) the White House staff would have backgrounded the press on any sensitive topics overlooked by other backgrounders.

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In short, Mr. Nixon would have rallied the Senate and destroyed the united front of opposition.

In addition, it's my hunch that the courts — which detest being drawn into political thickets — would have

himself up

reaved a sigh of relief and accepted the Stennis arrangement on the tapes. (Of course, the President's decision to turn them over to Judge Sirica settled that issue.) With this Cox probably would have quit, leaving Richardson and Ruckelshaus peacefully in place. And the great confrontation would be over.

Instead, it appears that the minute he had Ervin and Stennis lined up, the President went into frenzied action. There was nothing illegal about his telling Richardson to fire Cox, but politically it was madness: when Richardson was confirmed by the Senate, he was forced to sign in blood a promise that he would defend the autonomy of the special prosecutor.

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Those of us who have watched Richardson at close range have known him to rise above principle. But if he had gone through with Nixon's order, he would have committed political suicide — he couldn't run for fence-viewer after welsing on that one.

To summarize, Mr. Nixon was the victim of a self-gambit — he set himself up. Don't hold your breath waiting for impeachment — it's a lot easier to talk about that than to implement it — but I am concerned about the President's complete lack of political sense. In politics time is often the best buy on the shelf and this was such a moment.