

Mood at San Clemente-- Nixon Solitary, Confident

By Lou Cannon

Washington Post

San Clemente

President Nixon believes that the "judgment of history" will rank him as a President of high achievement despite the Watergate scandal.

"Neither the President nor his staff are the least bit self-conscious about what the administration has done for this country and for the ordinary citizen in it," said White House chief of staff Alexander M. Haig Jr. in an interview yesterday. "In any other time, without Water-

gate, this is what the American people would be saying."

Haig and other administration officials accompanying Mr. Nixon on his working vacation in San Clemente say that "without Watergate" reservation is an important one.

They concede that the administration still has "survivability" problems, particularly if the Watergate special prosecutor should find that Mr. Nixon was implicated in the Watergate cover-up. But they insist that the President has not been immobilized by the Watergate

crisis and that his attention is now focused on the far-ranging presidential action that he believes will form the basis of the historical judgment about him.

Mr. Nixon's aides say that he is now doing "serious stock-taking" of a highly private nature. He has engaged in such solitary pleasures as taking long walks on the beach, reading a recent book about Abraham Lincoln and watching football games on color television. He has also worked steadily to reduce a mound of paperwork relating to un-

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signed legislation and on a variety of options presented to him for his upcoming State of the Union address.

Haig says that Mr. Nixon's present combination of work, reflection and rest "lends itself better to the quietude of San Clemente than it does to the Oval Office."

Others in the administration view the President's current mood as one of near-withdrawal and of a reassertion of his long-standing penchant for privacy.

Mr. Nixon has left the San Clemente compound only once, when he attended the wedding of his physician, Dr. Walter Tkach last Friday. On that occasion he did not attend the wedding reception and immediately drove back to San Clemente, where he had dinner with his wife and watched a movie.

"The President doesn't want to see anyone and no one really wants to see the President," says one White House official. "He wants to be alone as much as possible and we appreciate that."

This official concedes that Mr. Nixon is sometimes resentful, even bitter, about the critical treatment he feels he has received at the hands of the press because of Watergate. But he says that the President is not otherwise despondent.

It is more a question, this aide says, of Mr. Nixon lacking someone to unburden himself to, as he used to do with his two top aides, H.

R. Haldeman and John Ehrlichman. When Haldeman and Ehrlichman departed in the wake of the President's admission of White House staff involvement in the Watergate scandal, the role of confidante was assumed by Mr. Nixon's close friend, Charles (Bebe) Rebozo.

On his last trip to San Clemente in August, the President spent much of his free time with Rebozo. The two men walked the beach together and once slipped off through a San Clemente side gate for a high-speed drive down the San Diego freeway.

High-speed driving is a thing of the past, now, and Rebozo is not present at San Clemente.

The aides who see the President most frequently are Haig, who coordinates the senior staff, and White House press secretary Ronald L. Ziegler, who has be-

come almost as inaccessible as the President.

But Ziegler has said often that Mr. Nixon is a "very private person" and none of the White House aides here regards the President's comparative isolation as anything unusual.

In fact, Haig speaks of it as part of a necessary process for Mr. Nixon and predicts that the President will speak to the public in 1974 on many issues and will meet regularly with the press.

The President's priorities now are the Middle East, inflation and the energy crisis. It is Haig's belief that the voluntary efforts of Americans, particularly if combined with a Middle East settlement and resumption of Arab oil shipments, will enable the country to avoid gas rationing in 1974.

The accomplishments that Haig says the President would have been widely praised for, but for Watergate, include the success in getting both Israel and the Arab nations to the bargaining table, "the successful transition from a wartime to a peace economy in 1972," a reduction in drug traffic, an inflationary spiral lower than that in other major nations, and a reduction in crime.

But Mr. Nixon remains

confident, Haig says, that history will vindicate him despite the current preoccupation with Watergate.

"Richard Nixon is a great student of history — in personal crisis he turns to history," Haig says. "He uses that to keep his own perspective."

Despite the official optimism, however, there is a realization that Mr. Nixon faces one of the most critical periods of his presidency when he returns to the White House.

The White House view is that the House of Representatives will not vote in favor of a resolution of impeachment on the basis of the information now known, and that it would take a new revelation of dramatic consequence to make an impeachment vote likely.

On the other hand, there is virtually unanimous agreement that Mr. Nixon would have a difficult time surviving if the Watergate special prosecutor concludes that the President was involved in the coverup.

"We haven't put Watergate to rest," says one otherwise optimistic official. "The President knows he still has a struggle on his hands."