

World of Politics

Some Questions About Mr. Nixon



David S. Broder

Arthur Hoppe's column does not appear on Thursdays

San Diego

CAMBODIA, the campus uproars and the stock market slump have obliterated the regional differences in our politics at least for the moment.

An east coast traveler journeying here via Milwaukee, Chicago, Denver and Los Angeles learns that President Nixon has "indeed brought us together." He has united his constituents in a spasm of doubt about the future of this country and his own capacity to lead it.

Everywhere the same questions dominate the conversations: why is the administration stumbling so badly? Can Mr. Nixon reassert his authority to govern? If the President fails to gain command of the crisis, who will take leadership?

Everyone complains of inaction. "Why don't they do something, instead of just talking?" the visitor from the east has asked. The complaint is directed against the President's seeming passivity as prices, interest rates and unemployment rise; at Congress, as the war in Indochina spreads; at the United Nations, as the conflict in the Middle East escalates toward major war; at college presidents, as students continue to outrage their elders.

The paralysis of action has its psychological effect in the rising nervousness and unpredictability of the citizenry. The country has a bad case of the shakes.

★ ★ ★

IT IS EXACTLY the kind of atmosphere in which the average politician most dreads putting his job on the line, as so many must do in this fall's elections.

Until the President shattered the domestic consensus by the decision to expand the war, 1970 seemed likely to be a perfectly traditional mid-term election: one fought on small issues of local, rather than national, import, turning on the mar-

ginal strength or weakness of local candidates.

That expectation now is changed. Big issues drive out small, and the public, one gathers, is now inclined to make this election nothing less than a vote of confidence or no confidence in the Nixon Administration.

Republicans would probably lose the election today. It might be a serious setback for the GOP except for one thing.

Voters seem to have little more confidence in the visible Democratic party leadership than they do in Mr. Nixon.

★ ★ ★
BUT NOW THAT Mr. Nixon's self-induced crisis has made the election a national referendum on his leadership the Democrats' lack of cohesion becomes an important factor. Disaffected though they are with Mr. Nixon, swing voters show no disposition to grant greatly enlarged power to the multi-headed hybrid of Humphrey - Kennedy - Muskie - McGovern - Mansfield - McCormack.

People voted for Mr. Nixon in the belief that he would restore some sense of order in their lives. They trusted him to stop the unpopular and divisive war, to stop inflation and to stop crime, and to stop the marches and the protests and the violence.

He has done none of these things, and that is why they are disillusioned with him. But they still want them done, and the leader they are looking for is the fellow who is tough enough to get that job done.

And that is why one hears so often, in California, the theories that Ronald Reagan's race for re-election for Governor may really be only the prelude to larger plans.

Times-Post Service