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Nixon at Midpassage: His Success May Depend on His Ability to Convey His Visions

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WASHINGTON, Jan. 20 — Shortly after 9 this morning, with a few reporters on hand, President Nixon appeared before his staff in the White House theater to tell them that his legislative program next year would be "the most comprehensive, the most far-reaching, the most bold program in the domestic field ever presented to an American Congress." He then dismissed the reporters, talked some more and finally retreated to the privacy of his hideaway office across the street from the White House—to enter, as he put it, a period of "solitary" struggle with his private thoughts and the rough drafts of the State of the Union message he will give at 9 P.M. Friday. For the rest of the day, such thoughts as he wished to make public were communicated — as usual — through his press secretary, Ronald L. Ziegler.

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That, essentially, is how Mr. Nixon spent the second anniversary of his Inaugural Address, and the manner in which he spent it tells something about his hopes at midpassage and the obstacles he confronts.

His hopes, first of all, are said to be large. His mood is reportedly determined and upbeat. His plans for radical changes in the organization of American government, and for new initiatives in such fields as health, are said to be broad and generous. He aims, in short, to use the coming year to build a record and leave his own imprint on history.

"What we are going to do is right and needs to be done and needs to be done now," he told his staff after the reporters had left. "It is time to seize this moment and present the American people with a new approach to government, one that is relevant to our times."

Yet the irony is that the man who wishes to make such an imprint on the public remains at bottom an introvert in politics, happy in the solitude of his office or study, uncomfortable and at times ineffective on the stump. Although Teddy Roosevelt is one of his heroes, the bully pulpit is not his style, and the question on which so many of his hopes depend is whether this private man can forcefully convey his personal visions to the public and the Congress.

Assessments of Mr. Nixon's first two years have been pouring out of typewriters here at a rapid rate in the last few days, listing successes and failures. His major successes, the consensus seems to be, were his reduction of American involvement in Vietnam, a few legislative victories—including postal reorganization—and his apparent success in cooling some of the tensions on the cities and campuses.

The list of failures also has a familiar ring: economic problems that proved more durable than Mr. Nixon himself had anticipated, uncertain relations with hiw own allies in Congress, the rejection of his welfare program and of two of his Supreme Court nominees, and his admitted failure to win the confidence of the blacks and the poor and some of the young.

Yet the interesting thing about these lists is the pattern that emerges from them. The pattern suggests, not at all surprisingly, that Mr. Nixon was unsuccessful on those items th he could not explain publicly and more successful on those for which he displayed some obvious public passion.

If his largest successes were in foreign policy — and in mutting the wholesale discontent stirred up by his predecessor's foreign policy — they occurred in part, most observers here agree, because he managed to convey at least a sense of wher he was headed in Vietnam and in the world. Most of his major addresses to the nation dealt with foreign policy, particularly Vietnam, and while the Cambodian incursion caused renewed unrest and individual tragedy on college campuses, most people seemed persuaded at year's end that Mr. Nixon wanted to disengage and would eventually do so.

By contrast, his public posture towards students and black seemed at times uncertain and ambiguous, and the feuding between liberals and conservatives within the Administration contributed to the uncertainty of groups that had never really supported him in the first place.

To the blacks, for example, he offered a 10,000-word statement calling for Southern school desegregation last March and sought money from Congress to carry it out. Yet only in effect told his black listeners that he would do no more than the law required of him to desegregate housing. To the students, meanwhile, he would offer a thoughtful speech one day, a terse comment about "bums" the next, and it took him days to make any comment at all on Kent State.

Even his coveted welfare program may have suffered from similar Presidential ambiguities. What he had once portrayed, in 1969, as an effort to guarantee a basic income for most Americans became, in the heat of the 1970 campaign, a surefire method of getting the loafers off the welfare rolls. An effort to be all things to all people may be smart politics, but in these and other cases the tactic netted the President nothing.

In recent weeks, however, men who regularly cover the White House have sensed a new mood there, which presumably reflects the President's own. His oratory has become more conciliatory, his approaches to the press and the Congress more open.

Whether Mr. Nixon has truly changed his mind about his enemies and critics remains a question, but he has told his staff to stop talking about the campaign and he has put on a show of enhanced toleration for his former targets.

Perhaps significantly, he has accepted the suggestions of his new Congressional relations aide, former representative Clark MacGregor, that he meet more frequently and informally with Democratic leaders and Murray Chotiner, a controversial political figure, is quietly leaving the staff.

Meanwhile, the President is said to be hopeful, if not fully convinced, that the new organizational structure he has brought to the White House will mute the bureaucratic divisions that plaged him in his first year and bring a sharper sense of direction to policy-making.

But the key to Mr. Nixon's success in the next year—and he has little more than that in which to make his mark, since politics will inevitably disrupt the legislative process in 1972—will be Mr. Nixon himself, particularly his capacities for effective salesmanship and Presidential leadership.

"He's gotten a big charge out of the last six months," one aide commented last week. "He thinks we have good programs. He wants to be known as the President who returned power to the people, and this is what most of his programs are aimed at. He is as excited now as I've ever seen him."

Would he continue to convey that excitement publicly next year? The aide was asked. Would he follow through?

"He'd better," was the reply. "He doesn't have much time to build a record."