

Another Stormy Spring Foreseen for Nixon

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WASHINGTON, March 25—Although President Nixon denied this week that he had just passed through his winter of discontent, there is little doubt around the White House that this is his stormiest season yet.

The President is not doing well with his programs in Congress. He is not doing as well as he hoped with the economy. His explanations of News Analysis tactics in Indo-China are being contested by many.

And he is not doing well in the opinion polls.

It is a worse time even than last year's Cambodian spring, his aides acknowledge, because the politicians are running for cover and leaving Mr. Nixon to find his own path back to preeminence.

Some of the President's difficulties are undoubtedly transitory. The polls will swing several more times before the 1972 election. The economy will perk up eventually. The combat in Vietnam will diminish again and more troops will come home.

Vulnerable in 1972

Some of the difficulties are traceable to the President's own initiatives. His proposals for welfare reform, revenue sharing and Government reorganization may be twisted beyond recognition in Congress. But he can claim credit at least for igniting the debates and forcing action.

Yet his troubles and opposition to his programs are being compounded because it is now widely assumed here that he will be highly vulnerable in 1972. Even if this estimate proves wrong, it has become a

political fact, emboldening the Democratic challengers and persuading even Republican leaders and members of Congress that Mr. Nixon needs them more than they need him.

With hard hat construction workers marching, for their own economic reasons, side by side with antiwar protesters, there is no longer any easy White House appeal to the "silent majority" in fact, Mr. Nixon is now saying that he must do what he is doing in spite of the opinion surveys, no longer because of them.

In 1969, the President could still reverse a low tide with a single television speech and mounds of favorable telegrams. Last year, he bounced back quickly after Cambodia in the general tumult of the election.

Dwindling Reserve

But, having failed to carry the Senate last fall and, as the vote on the supersonic transport showed, not even the "ideological majority" of which he boasted, Mr. Nixon must manage now with a dwindling political reserve.

As President Johnson often observed after his party's massive losses in the 1966 Congressional election, reduced dependence on the White House and successful defiance of it feed on each other, not only in Congress but far beyond.

The reports from Mr. Nixon's entourage are that he has remained remarkably composed and businesslike in his private councils. Some of his aides expect a tough, perhaps even bitter reaction in time. But so far, they have not seen even the twinges of defiance or self-pity that have shown through some of the President's recent television discussions.

It is Mr. Nixon's frank calculation that, by next year, he

will have fashioned enough economic recovery, with diminished inflation, and a large enough withdrawal of troops from Vietnam to let him take a proud record into the campaign on the issues that really count—peace and prosperity.

There is a frank concern among some of his associates, however, that he cannot in the interim afford further damage to the aura of the Presidency or to his credibility with the public.

They note, for instance, that the President ought to be getting considerable credit for his exertions on issues of the environment had he not allowed the fate of the supersonic transport plane to become the year's great symbolic battle in terms of the environment. Once it was cast that way, he was deserted by nearly half the Republicans in the House and more than a third in the Senate, including party leaders.

Avoiding a Duel

Some of Mr. Nixon's aides also note that the country could have been given a reasonable report on the fighting in Laos that would have been closer to the Administration's private estimates and avoided the appearance of a daily duel between the White House and the information media.

It could have been admitted that the fighting was much harder than expected, that the North Vietnamese brought up more troops and much more armor than anyone had predicted, and that language difficulties and the weather minimized the usefulness of much of the American tactical air support for Saigon's ground troops. Nonetheless, the President believes that the outnumbered South Vietnamese fought

well and that the whole operation consumed valuable time and enemy energies and supplies so as to make less likely any serious attack this year on the vulnerable southern portions of South Vietnam.

But this is not the way the case was put. So Mr. Nixon was left to make some unqualified claims of success while his Vice President once again assailed the contradicting media. And a good many citizens were left to wonder whether their Government could be believed.

Election years are normally discounted here as "lost" time to a President, because he is invariably seen only as a politician with a worn-out mandate.

Although Mr. Nixon set aside this year for only nonpolitical activity, serving his party best by appearing to be serving only the country, there are those in the White House who have begun to think that there is not much time left for anything except the quest for a new lease.