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Nixon Not Quite A Shoo-In for '72

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DRAMATIC turnabouts on the economy and Communist China have inspired a chorus of wondrous awe about the capacity of a President to make headlines. And those who confuse headlines with history believe that Mr. Nixon has already sewed up the 1972 election.

But there is something about Mr. Nixon which makes that judgment premature.

For one thing, there is a pattern of no follow-up. This first became clear when Mr. Nixon announced a "new American revolution" based on a program for revenue-sharing. But after that blare of self-praise, months went by before anybody could figure out what the program was, and even now the administration has put on no pressure for its enactment.

In the same vein, after the announcement of the forthcoming trip to China, Mr. Nixon left all the details up in the air. And the new economic measures were barely announced when he left Washington on a cross-country tour to San Clemente.

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THE LACK of interest in implementation combines with a heavy emphasis on hoked-up drama to give the impression that Mr. Nixon is mainly concerned with manipulating public opinion. After all, was it really necessary for him to announce the economic measures in a TV broadcast to the nation?

Did he have to spring the news of his China trip in another surprise TV announcement?

Even on his biggest decisions, moreover, Mr. Nixon seems always to be giving

way grudgingly under pressure of events. Ending convertibility of the dollar into gold, for instance, was a truly imaginative step. But Mr. Nixon did it only after the failure of his policies to control inflation.

The opening of the door to Communist China was equally a move of historic importance. But Mr. Nixon would have looked awful if he hadn't moved, for Peking's admission to the United Nations this fall was virtually assured.

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FINALLY, even as he posts down the high road of history, Mr. Nixon cannot resist the low road of political advantage. He took two truly cheap shots on race and religion.

One was the promise made to a meeting of the Knights of Columbus of help in getting government aid to parochial schools. However, the Nixon Administration has nothing even dimly resembling a program for that purpose, and the President's remark was a wholly gratuitous bid for Catholic votes.

Then there were the brief statements expressing the President's opposition to school busing. The issue had long since been muted by events, and Mr. Nixon only raised it for reasons of political expediency.

What all this means is that the Presidency in Mr. Nixon's hands is not the same as that office under Dwight Eisenhower or Franklin Roosevelt. Simply by making the big decisions, Mr. Nixon does not assure himself an outpouring of public confidence. He is not a shoo-in for 1972. He's going to have to work for reelection.