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Nixon abortion blunder exposes a vulnerability

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WASHINGTON — Democrats demoralized by fading prospects against President Nixon in November can take some heart from the political ineptitude, internal conflict and general confusion displayed at the White House in its feckless intrusion into the New York State struggle over abortion.

Out of the miasma of secrecy and contradictory statements flowing from the White House, these conclusions can safely be drawn: The intervention into New York abortion was authorized by Nixon himself, lacking either a full appreciation of the political realities involved or advice from his top lieutenants. Then, having belatedly realized the error of this misadventure, the President covered his tracks in a way that revealed the shortcomings of his political operation.

The New York abortion question, of course, will not make or break Mr. Nixon's re-election. Nevertheless, the episode reveals that the President, so astute and daring in international politics, has not lost his heavyhanded touch in dealing with delicate domestic questions, nor has the political skill of the White House's senior staff improved all that much since the chaotic early days of 1969.

The recommendation that Nixon intrude into the bitter New York fight over state abortion laws came from presidential speechwriter Patrick Buchanan, a dedicated conservative amidst the White House non-ideologues. The President was more than agreeable. On May 5, he signed a Buchanan-drafted letter to Cardinal Terence Cooke of New York supporting his campaign to repeal the state's liberal abortion law.

That same day, Cardinal Cooke's office asked Buchanan whether the letter could be made public. Buchanan said it could, and the cardinal's office released the political bombshell the next day. A prudent man careful about exceeding his authority, Buchanan would not have moved without an explicit green light from the President.

In fact, Nixon scarcely gave his endorsement of the New York archdiocese's anti-abortion campaign a second thought. Philosophically, he is anti-abortion. Politically, he was convinced that support of the cardinal would accelerate the trend of Catholics, nationwide but particularly in New York, away from the Democrats and towards the Republicans.

Reflexive response

So automatic was Nixon's reflexive re-

sponse that he did not even bother to consult John Mitchell, his campaign manager and chief political adviser. Had he bothered, Mitchell could have explained to the President that the justification for anti-abortion politics is simplistic on two counts.

First, pro-abortion sentiment is substantial — even among Catholics. According to New York State government sources, between 40 to 50 per cent of the women who have availed themselves of the liberalized law are Catholics. Since abortion is a question of state rather than federal law, this would seem to be one issue that the President ought to duck.

Second, the letter to Cardinal Cooke unthinkingly rebuffed Gov. Nelson Rockefeller (who later vetoed the legislature's repeal of the liberal law), jeopardizing the Nixon-Rockefeller entente carefully built since the 1968 election. Rockefeller, who as Nixon re-election campaign manager for New York is key to the President's rising hopes of

President's heavyhanded touch still evident in domestic questions

carrying the state, was outraged by the White House intrusion. So too was Mitchell, who has a close personal-political relationship with Rockefeller and wanted immediate amends to be made. John Ehrlichman, White House domestic policy chief, conferred with Buchanan on what could be done. Buchanan agreed that Rockefeller ought to be mollified.

Not prepared

But he was not prepared for Ehrlichman's May 10 interview with The New York Times claiming the President never had intended that the letter be made public and that its disclosure resulted from "sloppy staff work."

Beyond the interview, there was communication at the highest level between Albany and Washington. Rockefeller's inner circle was given the impression — an erroneous impression, based on our reporting — that some very high-level White House aide (not Buchanan) had authorized the release of the letter without the slightest authorization from the President.

The entire gamey story, reminiscent of Nixon's frustrating first two years as President, suggests nothing should be taken for granted in 1972. In a career of campaigning, the President has displayed a talent at pulling defeat from the jaws of victory. The needless mishandling of the abortion issue was a sign that not much has really changed. On larger issues, the political penalties could be immense.