

The State of the

By Saul Pett

WASHINGTON — (AP) — December 20, shortly after 3 p.m., a rare springlike day. A benign sun warmed the gardens visible through the windows of glass one and a half inches thick, which was installed in Franklin Roosevelt's time. The Oval Office, in this time, had a serene, unused tone, like a city street on a Sunday morning.

The President wore a light blue suit, white shirt, blue tie and, as usual, a small metal American flag in his lapel and blue and white cuff links bearing the Presidential Seal. He seated his visitor and himself in the two chairs with their backs to the fireplace.

"Will you have something — coffee or tea?"

His visitor hesitated.

"Oh, have something," Richard Nixon said, pressing a button. Black coffee soon arrived. The President folded his hands neatly in his lap and we began.

"How do you feel in this job after four years?"

"I've been fortunate. I haven't had to miss a day because of illness. I thought that was some kind of record but I find that Truman beat it, except he didn't do it in an elected four-year term. So, I'm the first four-year President who hasn't missed a day in office, providing I make it to Jan. 20.

"I've been blessed with a strong physical makeup, probably as a result of inheritance. You know, I've never had a headache in my life and my stomach never bothers me.

"I believe in the battle, whether it's the battle of a campaign or the battle of this office, which is a continuing battle. It's always there wherever you go. I, perhaps, carry it more than others because that's my way.

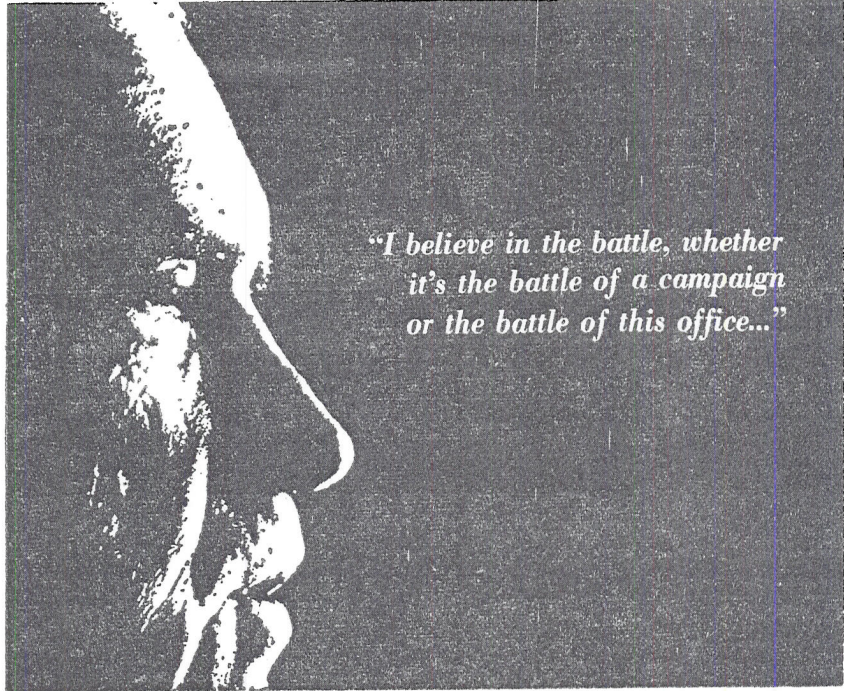
"It's important to live like a Spartan," the President was saying, "to have moderate eating and drinking habits. That's not to say I don't enjoy a good time.

"But the worst thing you can do in this job is to relax, let up.

"One must have physical and mental discipline here. This office as presently furnished probably would drive President Johnson up the wall. He liked things going on. He kept three TV sets here. I have none here or in my bedroom."

"I find to handle crises the most important qualities one needs are balance, objectivity and an ability to act coolly."

The President's hands had left his lap and, characteristically, he was now beginning to gesture with both arms or right fist pumping or one hand counting off points on the fingers of the other, body tilting slightly right, left or forward.



"I believe in the battle, whether it's the battle of a campaign or the battle of this office..."



NIXON IN THE WHITE HOUSE
He remains an elusive personality

President

His mood seemed to be one of confidence and, as his points developed, rising stimulation, perhaps even exhilaration. Aware that it has become an object of parody, aides report, the President now restrains himself from saying, "let me make this perfectly clear." But he still gives the impression of a man who can't help saying it viscerally, with unconscious body English.

He spoke of some of the "tough decisions" he has made, mentioning the movement into Cambodia and the decision last May 8 to bomb North Vietnam and mine Haiphong Harbor on the eve of his trip to Moscow.

"People," he said, "probably think the President was jumping up and down, barking orders, at those times. Actually, I have a reputation for being the coolest person in the room. In a way I am. I have trained myself to be that. The great decisions in this office require calm.

"I could go up the wall watching TV commentators. I don't. I get my news from the news summary the staff prepares every day and it's great; it gives all sides.

Don't Watch

"I never watch TV commentators or the news shows when they are about me. That's because I don't want decisions influenced by personal emotional reactions."

"The major weakness of inexperienced people," the President was saying, "is that they take things personally, especially in politics, and that can destroy you.

"Years ago, when I was a young congressman, things got under my skin. Herblock the cartoonist got to me. . . . But now when I walk into this office I am cool and calm. I read the news summary and get both sides. That's important because there are so many emotional issues these days, such as the war and busing and welfare.

"But I never allow myself

to get emotional. Now, there are Congressmen and Senators who cut me up, Fulbright, for example. But when he comes here, we're the best of friends. at least, I feel I am.

Long Run

"Now, it's not true that I don't feel emotional or pay attention to what others feel. But the most important thing I can do is to make decisions for the long run.

"Vietnam, for example. Now, we're having a difficult time. Things don't seem as bright as they did. So, we had to continue the May 8 policy to bomb the North.

"We will obtain the right kind of peace but we won't get it because of artificial deadlines, such as the election or Christmas or the inaugural."

Then he said:

"Now when Henry Kissinger comes in here in the morning and brings up what Scotty Reston and the other columnists are saying, I tell him, 'Henry, all that matters is that it comes out all right. Six months from now, nobody will remember what the columnists wrote.'

"Decision makers can't be affected by current opinion, by TV barking at you and commentators banging away with the idea that World War III is coming because of the mining of Haiphong. Nor can decisions be affected by the demonstrators outside."

Think-Work

Among his think-work places reporters have been permitted to see, the Executive Office Building suite across from the White House seems the most lived-in. The walls of the outer room are covered with cartoons involving the tenant.

"Any Herblocks here?" I asked the aide showing me through.

"You kidding?"

The inner office is heavy with souvenir gavels, footballs, elephants, family pictures, a signed golf card recording a hole in one for Richard Nixon in 1961 and, among plaques, one attesting to the fact that he was

made an "honorary special agent of the FBI" by J. Edgar Hoover.

Four Books

On the desk were four books which appeared to be current presidential reading when I was there, or books being called to his attention. On top was one in which about two dozen pages were marked with paper clips. This was Herman Wouk's "The Winds of War," a romantic best-seller about World War II.

There were also Noel Busch's biography of Theodore Roosevelt, whom President Nixon admires; "The Throne of Saturn," a novel by Allen Drury, and "Creed or Chaos?" a collection of theological essays and talks by Dorothy L. Sayers, who is better known as a mystery writer.

The President continued his decision of crisis-handling, a subject he has found compelling for years.

"I'll probably do better in

the next four years having gone through a few crises in the White House, having weathered them and learned how to handle them coolly and not subjectively.

Make Mistakes

"... I probably am more objective — I don't mean this as self-serving — than most leaders. . . . When you're too subjective, you tend to make mistakes."

"Mr. President, despite the continuing problems, is it possible to relax at all in this job after four years?"

The President thought a moment.

"In speeches or press conferences or interviews," he said, "you have to be up and sharp. You can't be relaxed. The Redskins were relaxed in their last game of the regular season and they were flat and they got clobbered.

"You must be up for the great events. Up but not up tight.

"Having done it so often, I perhaps have a finger honed sense of this. But you can overdo it, overtrain and leave your fight in the dressing room.

In Wilderness

When I came into office, I'd been through enough — those shattering defeats in 1960 and 1962, and then those eight years 'in the wilderness,' the way DeGaulle and Churchill were.

"The result was I was able to confront tough problems without flapping. I don't flap easily. An individual tends to go to pieces when he's inexperienced. . . .

"Now, there are just not many kinds of tough problems I haven't had to face one way or another. In that respect, the fact that my political career required a comeback may have been a blessing."

Make Decisions

Now in our talk in the Oval Office, the President was making the point that it is important to spend less time on unimportant matters in his job by delegating authority. He said:

"If somebody here can do it better, he does. Now, Grover Cleveland read every bill that came before him. These days you can't.



President Nixon and Correspondent Saul Pett during Oval Office interview

—AP Photos

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PRESIDENT NIXON ADDS EMPHASIS IN ANSWERING A QUESTION
"The team goes as fast as the coach and quarterback, and I am both"

You'd go blind; there are so many. He'd rather do something poorly himself than somebody else do it well. I am the reverse.

"But I make all the important decisions, domestic or foreign. And when major decisions are involved, I put everything else out of my mind."

"Mr. President, considering your political career and those defeats you mentioned, the landslide this year must have been doubly sweet. Can you tell me some of your feelings election night?"

Richard Nixon smiled and looked down at his hands, which were temporarily grounded.

"Well, the greatest pleasure was the kick the young people — Tricia and Julie — and Pat got out of it. Those defeats in 1960 and 1962 were so traumatic for them. To most women, things look black or white; a man tends to roll with events.

"Oh sure. I took it pretty hard myself. But then there was 1968, and 1972 capped it all, despite all that talk about a one-term presidency.

A Landslide

"After four years of the most devastating attacks on TV, in much of the media, in editorials and columns, and then all that talk in the last two or three weeks of the campaign of the gap narrowing... and then whap—A landslide, 49 states, 61 percent of the vote!"

The President paused.

"You'd think I'd be elated then. But it has always

been my experience that it doesn't really come to that.

"But the family — David and Eddie (sons-in-law) kept running to me in the Lincoln Sitting Room with the results. They were so excited they made me feel excited. Then, after my TV talk here at the Shoreham Hotel and staying up for the California returns . . . Well, you're so drained emotionally at the end, you can't feel much. You'd think that just when the time comes you'd have your greatest day. But there is this letdown."

A Chore

On rare occasions, rarer even than his news conferences, White House reporters see the President informally. One such was New Year's Eve, 1970, when he invited a few in for drinks in the EOB office. He delivered a small talk on how to make "the world's best martinis."

made them and, while they drank his approvingly, he nursed a glass of wine.

"He was quite pleasant but you had the feeling this was a chore for him, to show us his informal side," one reporter recalled.

At a news briefing last month, Press Secretary Ron Ziegler was asked about a report that the President was seen "strolling in purple flared trousers."

Ziegler: "Flared is a bit of an exaggeration."

Do you find that the presidency is a continuous learning process?"

"Oh, absolutely, certainly," he said. "It is for everyone in this job." He turned the conversation to matters of more immediate interest to him.

Recharge People

"Now, there are some people leaving (the administration) and some staying. I try to recharge them. There can never be a letdown in this office. That's the danger of a landslide. I want everyone to have a new charge, a new sense of challenge.

". . . There are those who say there are no restraints on a president if he doesn't have to run again. That is really a fatuous and superficial analysis of the presidency . . .

"Individuals who serve here do not serve to get re-

lected but to do great things. And they could be even greater when you don't have to worry about reelection.

"Now, what we want to do, we want everybody to think the challenge is just as great. The leader has to whip them up. The team goes just as fast as the leader, as the quarterback and coach, and I am both."

"Mr. President, surely there is some sense of relief being out from under the pressure of reelection?"

Great Experience

"Well, campaigning is a great experience, win or lose. People should not be afraid to step up to it. You know, there are people in the House and the Administration, who are 40 or 45, who should run for higher posts, but they get too cautious, they want to stick to the safe jobs. You can't be afraid to take chances in

"It's important never to look back unless you can learn about the future from it. Once the thing is done, it's done, and I look to the future."

He did confirm that the President owns pants without cuffs, adding, "He's a regular guy; he wears sports clothes."

Nonetheless, Richard Nixon remains a formal, serious man, who is rarely seen without jacket and tie even while flying Air Force One, strolling at his home in San Clemente, or sitting alone, reading, under a palm tree in Key Biscayne.

politics. But not foolish chances.

"This game affects the life of the nation and the world. For that reason, an individual, whether he's a President or a member of Congress or the Senate or the Cabinet must always play the game of politics and statesmanship right up to the hilt.

"As to a sense of relief over not having to face another election . . . Well, I still have a responsibility to help my party and others who share my views. I will meet that.

"There is some relief not to have to spend time with people from state after state who say you have to do this or that or you won't win. How a campaign might be affected does have some small influence. But now that is gone. I don't have to think of all those niggling details, such as who should get what airport."

Good Treatment

The President paused and smiled.

"But it's also true that when you win 49 states, they'll all get good treatment. Now, about Massachusetts. I've got so many Harvard men in the Administration. Massachusetts will be treated right.

There is some relief not to have to do something solely for political purposes. You still have to lead, to travel to the country and get the support of the people. But taking the personal factor out is, indeed, one of the major dividends of not having to run again."

After many years of bitter controversy, of attack and counter-attack, of charges of "the plastic man" and clichés about the "old Nixon," the "new Nixon" and the "new-new Nixon," a reporter who pursues the essence of his personality feels somehow vaguely dissatisfied at each turn in the trail. He opens one door to open another door and yet another door, and asks, finally, the people who work closest

to him: "If I knew him as well as you do, what else might I know, what might surprise me?"

Public Image

His aides and assistants appear sympathetic to the question; they seem to realize that much does not come through in the public image, much remains invisible behind a misty curtain of design and circumstances.

They say this, that beyond what the public may see in intense effort, ambition, ability, courage and dedication, that he is privately a man of warmth and kindness.

They speak of his many acts of personal thoughtfulness: of refusing to go to any more football games because "20 people have to be displaced"; of sending an encouraging letter and autographed picture to the ill mother of an assistant; of making a point of meeting an aide's family and saying "they're nice"; of making available, within a half hour of hearing of Harry Truman's illness, a plane for his daughter; of inviting, on learning he liked to fish, one of the White House elevator operators to Key Biscayne with him; of writing a three-page letter of advice to the son of an assistant on learning the boy was entering law school.

Never Stuffy

In an introduction to a small picture book about her father, Julie Nixon Eisenhower told readers she hoped they would get "the impression of my father that so many people miss — dignified when he needs to be, but never stuffy." Several of his aides make the same point in discussing the difference between the public and private man.

"What is most different," said one aide, "is that in private he is unafraid to let his intellectual sophistication come through. In public, in his speeches, he thinks that the best way to reach people is through the lowest common denominator. In private, he sees distinctions and subtleties, and gets behind language.

"He is strong on using the same phrases over and over again in his speeches, like in an advertising campaign. And if a speech writer wants to be certain he'll get a paragraph in, he'll find an 'historic first.'"

More Grabbers

"He is privately sophisticated enough to be a bit embarrassed by this. He will write in the margins of a submitted speech, 'not enough cheer lines' or 'not enough grabbers.' Discussing this, he will do it with a grin that implies that this or that may be oversimplification but you need a little show biz."

Back in the Oval Office, Ziegler had come in a second time to remind the President that he was running late for his next appointment. The President, who had been generous with his time, wanted to make another point about a man in his position.

Rising and leading me across the office, he said:

"It's important never to look back unless you can learn about the future. Once a thing is done it's done, and I look ahead. And you can't look to the future myopically. It's important to have the long view here. That's why it's a good thing this office is oval; it's easier to get the long view."