

THE PRESIDENCY/HUGH SIDNEY

Outracing the Past

OFTEN when things seem very bad, and occasionally even when they seem very good, Richard Nixon just cuts himself adrift from the past. He lives in a future conjured in those lonely sessions with his silver Parker pen and yellow legal pads. He was out there again last week when he spoke on the Inaugural stand in his club coat and striped trousers. He had surveyed the landscape beyond the day and marked the way stations: the start of his generation of peace, a prospering nation, a less extravagant government and a new spirit of individuality and competition.

This long view, as the Nixon followers would describe it, is one reason why he was there taking the oath of the highest office for the second time. He churns toward his goals, and just when it appears that he has run over and offended too many people for him to go much further (Watergate, inflation, bombing), he pulls himself up at one of his chosen spots and produces a Peking summit, or a billion-dollar grain deal with Russia, or maybe a cease-fire in Viet Nam. Past bitterness and doubt are largely forgotten as the world rolls on.

Nixon may be the first President to instinctively use Alvin Toffler's "roaring current of change." Events tumble over themselves in the reckless race of this society toward "future shock." Yesterday and its outrages are often obliterated by today and its triumphs.

Nixon has been ruminating to his visitors more than ever about the need to disregard the fluctuations of affection from the media, Congress and even the voters. He has talked about his own days of harassment as a young Congressman when he traveled from emotional peak to valley with the morning headlines, of the deep depression brought on by Herblock's biting cartoons during his vice-presidential terms. "Don't let that happen to you," he told his people.

Nixon lately has chided Henry Kissinger to forget the sentiments of the columnists and get on with a cease-fire. Not so long ago a White House staff member, who could not understand Nixon's indifference to the good and bad commentary filling the air, asked for an explanation from H.R. ("Bob") Haldeman, the man who understands the President best. In Haldeman's words came some classic Nixoniana: "We do not propose to take pleasure when those people are nice to us, because we do not expect to take pain when they are nasty." Nixon, muses his former counselor Pat Moynihan, has made himself "immune to hate."

In the moments of extreme jubilation, Nixon will tell his celebrants not to overdo it because there will be bumps ahead. Coming home from one of his successful overseas meetings, he heard his staff exulting over the raves. "A President overseas always is a success at first. We'll know better in six months." When people get too despondent around him, Nixon turns it the other way, seeing a high plateau ahead. "None of this will matter," he told one man during the Christmas bombing outcry, "if we succeed and bring peace."

In a White House bull session somebody asked what Nixon would have done with George McGovern's problem of Tom Eagleton. "Aha," proclaimed a Nixon aide, "McGovern went for instant gratification, declaring his '1,000%' support for Eagleton. Nixon would have said, 'I'll think about it and then I'll let you know.' And he would have gone off to consider the long-range implications."

Nixon's fanatical sense of solitude stems in part from his determination to be ahead of everyone. He sloughs off details. "I'm a total captive of my three in baskets," says an about-to-be Cabinet officer. "The President has one, and he doesn't pay any attention to it." In his struggles with the economy, Nixon kept telling his advisers not to fiddle a policy to death with small changes every week. If he had to change, he said, he would go beyond everybody to make sure of success. That is how price and wage controls went on and how they came off.

There are those who still think that the orphaned moments of Nixon's past will catch up with him. They see the meaningful men of history rising from identifiable sources and building their purposes and characters on fixed principles that, even when bent along the way, tend to endure. The view of some of the landscape behind Nixon is bewildering, cluttered with unexplained contradictions and uprooted theology. But so far, good or bad, Nixon has overcome all the doubts.

Lyndon Johnson is a man who, in his own way, relishes the past and often dwells there. The Nixon partisans argue that it helped trap him. It is a curious footnote to history that long before he ran into trouble, Johnson had turned central Texas into a living monument to his heritage and his journey to the summit (the L.B.J. birthplace, the L.B.J. boyhood home, the L.B.J. state park, the L.B.J. ranch and more).

About the only surviving landmark from Nixon's past is the tiny clapboard house where he was born in Yorba Linda, Calif., still the worn residence of a school maintenance man. For now, that house is about as distant as it can be. Watching Nixon with a new four-year charter in his hand and his voice ringing out over the Capitol Plaza, one had to wonder if the President would not always outrace the past.



NIXON'S BIRTHPLACE



Clockwise from top left: John Connally and wife arriving at Kennedy Center for Salute to the States concert; Governor George Wallace receiving greetings at concert; President's youngest brother Edward on arrival at Friendship Airport; Senator Hubert Humphrey bussing TV Hostess Barbara Walters at Kennedy Center; Presidential Adviser Henry Kissinger with his parents signing autograph at concert. Center: Busts of Nixon and Agnew on Inaugural medal.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: BORSARI; EDDIE ADAMS; HALSTEAD; REGAN; BORSARI.