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The President's Ability to Bounce Back

The Nixon administration appears, once again, to be beleaguered, but it would be prudent for its critics to be cautious about crowing at its discomfort.

All the surface signs suggests Mr. Nixon is in serious trouble simultaneously on several fronts. His nominee for director of the FBI, Patrick Gray, clearly has failed to satisfy examining senators of his qualifications for the post, and the President's choice faces repudiation.

The Watergate and ITT case investigations turn up, almost daily, fresh evidence of the involvement of administration officials in shady and shoddy dealings, weakening the credibility of the oft-repeated White House denials of official wrongdoing.

While Republican lawmakers fret openly about being forced to defend administration appointees and policies they cannot stomach, the Democrats, reuniting more rapidly than expected, move aggressively to challenge Mr. Nixon's budget and programs.

The euphoria of the Vietnam ceasefire and prisoner returns is fading with surprising speed, as awareness grows that the long, twilight struggle for supremacy in Indochina is dragging on.

Most serious, inflation has surged since the January decision to scrap wage-price controls, and housewives are hollering about the skyrocketing costs of food. This, plus the assault on the dollar in the world money markets, has severely shaken Wall Street's confidence in Mr. Nixon's management of the economy.

Once again, traveling journalists come back to Washington to report that their lecture audiences are asking them, "What the dickens is wrong with Nixon and his people? Can't they do anything right?"

Without minimizing in any way the seriousness of the setbacks the administration has suffered since Inauguration Day, it is pertinent to remember that we have been down this road before. Like most presidents, Mr. Nixon has seen severe fluctuations in his fortunes. More than most, he has been able to generate major counter-offensives just at the point when his enemies thought they had him pinned.

He demonstrated this knack as early as November of 1969, when his campus and congressional critics organized an all-out assault on his Vietnam policy. With a few speeches and help from Spiro Agnew, Mr. Nixon turned public opinion against the Moratorium and the end-the-war resolutions in Congress so thoroughly as to guarantee his virtual freedom of action on that same issue for the next three years.

Again, after the 1970 mid-term election capped a year of administration catastrophes, ranging from the Carswell nomination to Kent State to inflationary recession and the misconceived "radiclib" campaign, Mr. Nixon's grip on the government was wobbling visibly.

But, in that crisis, too, his response was anything but timid. He shook up his cabinet, brought John Connally into the government, reversed his course on economic controls and launched the China-Russia diplomacy—and thus put himself in a position to win his landslide re-election victory.

Given this history, it would be a mistake to assume that Mr. Nixon will now docilely let the current tide of events roll over him. As President, he retains greater initiative than any other actor in the political drama, and he has shown a willingness to use it.

A wide range of economic options—including a return to tough controls—is available to him. Public opinion is clearly on his side in the battle of the budget.

He can certainly find a better FBI director than the unfortunate Mr. Gray. And even at this late date, with all the weak excuses and embarrassing deceptions that are on the record, he can still clean up his own house before the ITT and Watergate probers force him to do so—and probably, gain public credit for doing it.

If Mr. Nixon has learned anything from his first term, he has learned that the American people seek—and applaud—a President who uses the powers of that office boldly and confidently. It would be surprising if he did not move—and move dramatically—to reassert his control of what is now clearly a deteriorating political and economic situation.

But it also must be said that this time one hopes the President will not spare those close to him who have demonstrated a penchant for putting him in hot water. The record of bungling of some of the top White House aides is spectacular. If Henry Kissinger had fouled up as repeatedly as some of Mr. Nixon's closest political, economic and domestic advisers, he would long ago have been delegated to teaching diplomatic history to Harvard freshmen.

It is time—indeed, past time—for Mr. Nixon to demonstrate some of that vaunted toughness toward those whose exercise of delegated powers has been a calamity—for him and the country.