

The Nixon Watch (John Osborne)

Out in the Open

San Clemente

Since the President was last reported upon in this space, he has made a televised spectacle of himself in New Orleans. He has confounded and defeated his media adversaries at a news conference in San Clemente, and he has won the senate vote to let him replace Secretary of State William Rogers with Henry Kissinger. He has also shown a certain necessity of presence and poise in the face of an auditing firm's report on the purchase of his San Clemente estate. And, in a word, he has left a better impression of himself than he has in any of his previous reports and discussions with each of his constituents, and a somewhat better impression of himself in the future of his New Orleans presidency.

It is a pity that he is leaving to fly directly from Washington to San Clemente instead of accompanying the President's

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press party to New Orleans debars any pretense of a first-hand appraisal of his performance there. I must rely upon the accounts of other reporters, television film, and an excellent recording of Mr. Nixon's speech to the Veterans of Foreign Wars. There was every reason for the President to be at his best in New Orleans. He had just had two presumably restful days at his Florida home. His principal subject was to be his Indo-China policy and his VFW audience was sure to be receptive to anything he had to say about that. Local police and Secret Service reports of a conspiracy to kill the President—a plot that faded into the mist of rumor once he had come and gone—caused a change in his memorized route that was said to disappoint and annoy him, but his spokesmen hardly mentioned this when they were later asked to explain his heard and witnessed behavior. When he saw reporters and cameramen closer to him than he wanted or had expected them to be, he lunged at Press Secretary Ronald Ziegler and snarled at him and shoved him. During his VFW speech, the President slurred a distressing number of his words. Reporters who have been observing him for years thought they saw something uncharacteristically and unmistakably odd in his gait and his gestures. Some of them thought that he was drunk. None of them, so far as I know, was sure enough of that impression to report or even suggest it in published and broadcast accounts. Because the impression was so much a feature in the remembered scene, I report it without apology. I also accept the assertions of Nixon assistants that the President does not drink at midday, certainly not before he is to make a public

address, and drinks very little at any time. The official explanation, in part implied and in part explicit, that Mr. Nixon in New Orleans showed and succumbed to the strain that he's been under for many months, what with the Watergate scandals and other troubles and pressures, seems sufficient and believable to me. It should be added that a senior Nixon assistant who was with the President in New Orleans and who later saw a televised replay of the VFW appearance and speech was shocked and disbelieving when he was told of the impression reported here. This assistant thought and told Mr. Nixon that he'd done extremely well in New Orleans. I gather that the President didn't quarrel with this estimate of the performance, though some of his other assistants did. They encouraged a later report that the President held a promised press conference in California sooner than he'd first intended because he agreed with advisers who felt that the impact of the New Orleans spectacle could be disastrous and had to be quickly offset.

There was no corresponding dispute at the western White House about the impact of Mr. Nixon's San Clemente press conference. His people judged it to be an unqualified triumph. I suspect that their judgment of it was better than that of the reporters, myself among them, who tended to mull over the many hesitations and equivocations in the President's answers to the Watergate questions that were put to him and to minimize the effect that his readiness to respond to such questions appears to have had. There's a certain suspicion, and no doubt a good deal of wishful self-deception, in the expressed conviction that the Presi-

dent has put the worst of his Watergate travail behind him. How he and trusted White House assistants can really believe this, given the prospect of Watergate indictments and looming confrontations with the courts and Congress over his power to withhold evidence baffles me. But the attested and reportable fact is that the President and his assistants do believe it.

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