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# A State of 'Political Siege'

The President's famous Watergate counterattack has turned into a case of out of the frying pan and into the fire. Now two explosive affairs — the Agnew case and the issue of the White House tapes — are working powerfully against his standing and authority.

Since both cases are in the courts, the President's control is incomplete. His favorite avenue of escape, the foreign policy avenue is closed off. For what is shaping up is a state of political siege apt to last for months.

In the case of Mr. Agnew, the President is now paying the price of a game plan that went awry. The White House idea was a quick resignation followed by the appointment of a new vice president able to relaunch the administration. John Connally was already warming for the job.

But the Justice Department, under Atty. Gen. Elliot Richardson, refused to make with the Vice President any deal which involved abandoning the prosecution. Mr. Agnew, faced with the certainty of prosecution, refused to resign.

Now the case goes to the courts where the President faces a variety of unpleasant possibilities. Perhaps the Vice President will be indicted and brought to trial. If so, the Justice Department will spread on the record evidence that can only thicken the dark impression left by Watergate. That is the impression of a President who handpicked for his administration men of poor calibre and low standards.

Maybe the Vice President will carry through the courts the contention that the Constitution requires that he be impeached before being indicted. If so, there will be still further deepening of the Watergate impression of an administration that sees itself as outside the ordinary course of the law.

Moreover, everybody in town, including the Vice President who is now airing his feelings to the press, knows that the White House was scheming to unload him. There is widespread awareness of indignities and humiliations — for example, a complete cold shoulder given the Vice President when he attended the White House dinner for President Ali Bhutto of Pakistan the week before last.

Right-wingers inside the Republican Party have long been complaining about President Nixon's treatment of their ideological friend, the Vice President. Now moderate Republicans, critical of the White House, are seizing on the Vice President as a symbol for grievances. Hence his luncheon with Mark Hatfield of Oregon, and nine other progressive senators, last Wednesday.

As one member of that group put it: "The Vice President has come up to Capitol Hill the way in medieval times a leader under fire holed up in the Citadel. He's prepared to fight, and he's lining up everybody with a case against Nixon."

If anything, the issue of the tapes is worse for the President than the Agnew affair. Archibald Cox, the special prosecutor, has asked for access to the tapes made by the President of nine conversations and phone calls which might bear on criminal activity by persons implicated in the Watergate scandal. The President has refused on the grounds that release of the tapes would breach the doctrine of confidentiality.

The case will come before the Su-

preme Court in the next few weeks. But the overwhelming view of public opinion is that the President should yield up the tapes. That view will become even more pronounced if the Supreme Court, as seems likely, follows the lower courts in ordering Mr. Nixon to cough up the material. Should Mr. Nixon still refuse, the issue of his impeachment will come very much to life.

While the President can do little to meet these difficulties directly, the trouble might be mitigated if he could achieve some striking success in other areas—notably foreign policy. To that end Mr. Nixon has been active recently. In the past few days he has met

with, among others, Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko.

But that meeting only underlined sticky going abroad. Prospects for improved relations with Russia have been hung up by the Congress on the issue of civil liberties in the Soviet Union, including freer emigration. Mr. Gromyko in his speech at the United Nations last week was notably tough on the emigration issue.

What all this means is that the President is under more pressure than ever, and with fewer means of counterattack or escape at his command. The going ahead promises to be very tough, and no one can be confident of the outcome.

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