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A Confident Richard M. Nixon Re-emerges

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The man who stood before the White House press corps this morning seemed like the Richard M. Nixon of early 1972—the Nixon whose voice didn't quaver, the Nixon who dealt confidently with a wide range of questions, the Nixon who clearly felt on top of his job, the Nixon who could even manage a bit of humor.

In his 34th Presidential news conference—his third in six weeks, following a hiatus of more than five months—Mr. Nixon began a bit shakily, with a noticeable unsteadiness in his voice. But it disappeared in a moment or two and didn't return.

An Even Reply

Watergate, which had dominated his news conferences of Aug. 22 and Sept. 5, was the topic of only one of the 14 questions—a routine inquiry about his refusal to release tape recordings of his conversations.

The President was obviously nettled only once when he was asked whether the hiring of "a local landscape architect to redesign the flower beds on the west side of the San Clemente residence four times a year" represented a wise expenditure of the taxpayers' money.

But he neither lost his temper nor offered a self-serving explanation. Instead, He fixed a stern eye on his questioner, Adam Clymer of the Baltimore Sun, and replied evenly:

"I really think anything I would say in answer to your question, in view of the way you have already presented it as a statement, would not convince you or anyone else."

Then Mr. Nixon went on to the next question. Neither it, nor any of those that followed, could have been termed hostile.

At San Clemente on Aug. 22, the President remarked when 30 minutes into his news conference that he had not had "one question on the business of the people, which shows you how we are consumed with this" [the Watergate case]. He also had sarcastic comments for several correspondents, notably Dan Rather of CBS News and James Deakin of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch.

Today, however, the tone had completely changed. Five of the questions dealt with foreign policy—his travel plans, the appointment of an Ambassador to Moscow, the situation of Soviet émigrés—and six with the troubles of Vice President Agnew. There was one on domestic politics, and one on the economy.

Jokes With Reporters

For the first time, then, there was an indication that the President's constant efforts to turn the nation's attention back to "the business of the people" had had some effect—although the intense interest in Mr. Agnew cannot have pleased him, in that it prolongs the impression of official wrongdoing.

Mr. Nixon, who was

dressed in a blue suit with a blue polka-dot tie, seemed far less stiff than he has recently, leaning casually on the lectern in the White House briefing room and occasionally joking with the correspondents jammed into the small space.

When he mistook Gene Risher of United Press International for Tom Jarriel of ABC News, the President covered his embarrassment with a quick thrust:

"You look like Jarriel . . . You are not paid as much as he is, though."

Mr. Risher replied, "I know."

Then Mr. Nixon again: "U.P.I., please notice — a raise in salary."

Later, speaking of his economic advisers, many of whose predictions have proved wide of the mark, the President said that they "are not always right, but they are always sure in everything that they recommend."

Misunderstanding Described

A question about Senator Charles H. Percy, a liberal Republican from Illinois, produced a fairly detailed comment from Mr. Nixon about his political plans for 1976—something that neither he nor his advisers had much time to think about earlier this year.

The President said that he had misunderstood Mr. Percy's intent in pressing for the appointment of a special prosecutor several months ago, and that that misunderstanding had led him to tell

a Cabinet meeting that he would do everything he could to block any attempt by Mr. Percy to win the Presidency.

After a meeting with the Senator, Mr. Nixon continued, the misunderstanding was cleared up, and he "will not be opposed at this time, and should he prove to be the strongest candidate, he will not be opposed." Mr. Nixon described Mr. Percy as an able, campaigner and an articulate spokesman.

But the President said that there would be a long list of Republican hopefuls in 1976, including Governors or former Governors; Mayor Richard G. Lugar of Indianapolis, a number of Senators and one or two Representatives.

Politically, the list was interesting in two respects: It omitted Mr. Agnew, and it included Mr. Lugar, who has been considered a rank outsider by most party professionals.

As for himself, Mr. Nixon said, he would wait until the primaries were well under way before committing himself, and he might not do so even then.

"I think we learned in the year 1972," he added, "that when an individual moves from the Senate—and I am referring now to the primaries—to the big leagues . . . sometimes he can't hit the pitching."

That sounded like a reference to Senator Edmund S. Muskie of Maine, the early Democratic front-runner in 1972, who floundered in the primaries.