

War and Watergate

Aura at White House Is One of Relief As Public Eye Is Turned From Scandal

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WASHINGTON, Oct. 9 — When President Nixon stepped onto the South Lawn of the White House today to welcome President Félix Houphouët-Boigny of the Ivory Coast to this country, there seemed to be a new spring in his walk and more self-assurance in his manner than had been evident for a number of months. Suddenly, in this capital where moods and events change so rapidly, attention was no longer on Watergate and related scandals but on the war in the Middle East. And Mr. Nixon seemed at ease with the crisis when he spoke of "building a new structure of peace" intended to "give a better hope for avoiding war breaking out as it has over and over again for the past 25 years."

Since the hostilities broke out on Saturday, catching the President and others by surprise, the atmosphere at the White House has been one of relief that the public was now wanting to know what he would do to bring peace rather than how much income taxes he paid or what his role was in the Watergate cover-up.

One White House official said that the severity of the crisis demonstrated a point Mr. Nixon had been trying to make all along, without much success—that what the President was doing in foreign affairs and in governing the country should replace the assorted scandals as the center of attention.

Moves for Détente

This feeling was reinforced by the fact that his efforts in the Middle East were centered on the one area in which Mr. Nixon has placed the most pride—his moves for détente with the world's great Communist powers. The emphasis of White House statements for the last two days has been that the President's hope for containing the Israeli-Arab war is based chiefly on diplomatic initiatives and particularly the new understandings between him and the Soviet leader, Leonid I. Brezhnev.

Further, Mr. Nixon has long been most interested in and comfortable with foreign affairs and has encouraged the role as a crisis President dealing in matters of world peace and diplomacy.

Discussing his preference for foreign affairs last March 17 with Theodore H. White, author of "Making of the President—1972," Mr. Nixon said that the American economy was so strong "it would take a genius to wreck it," while a Presidential mistake in foreign policy would be "fatal."

Thus, the White House has

moved to emphasize the President's role in the Middle East. Yesterday, Mr. Nixon announced that he was canceling a scheduled appearance in Carthage, Tenn., next Saturday for dedication of a new dam so he could concentrate his efforts on ending the war.

He allowed his press secretary Ronald L. Ziegler, who had not held a news briefing in many weeks, presumably because of the Watergate situation, to appear again at the press room podium and publicly express the President's views on the war.

Some Problems Remain

Even before the war began, Presidential aides were expressing the belief that the worst of Watergate was behind the President, and that he was beginning to recover his credibility and the ability to govern. But everyone agreed that a number of problems remained for the President, including the following:

¶The détente with the Soviet Union and its bearing on the Middle East was a very delicate situation, and it was yet to be seen how the President's diplomatic initiatives worked.

¶While the President's assistants were contending that recovery had begun, the public opinion polls showed him still at low ebb. The most recent Gallup Poll, published last Thursday, showed that of those questioned between Sept. 21 and 24, only 32 per cent approved of the way Mr. Nixon was handling his job, and 59 per cent disapproved. Aside from Watergate, much of his low rating was based on rising prices, a trend that is expected to continue for some months.

One of the chief elements of Watergate, the question of the Presidential tape recordings bearing on the evidence of possible crimes in the White House, is still in the courts and is sure to be of major interest in the weeks ahead.

Many observers believed that it was too early to tell how the new White House staff setup, designed to be more open and more cooperative with Congress, would work out. For example, Melvin R. Laird, chief Presidential adviser for domestic affairs and chief advocate of openness, has apparently found it necessary to present his views in public. This practice has found little favor with the President in the past.

The latest is that Mr. Laird is spreading the word that he believes Mr. Nixon may be taking too hard a line against releasing the tapes, and there is another round of rumors that Mr. Laird may soon be leaving.

For the time being, however, the Mideast crisis is being cited by the President's supporters as an indication of how relatively unimportant are the wrongdoings of Watergate.