



A Caretaker Regime for Nixon?

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THE EVENTS of the past week have made the Nixon Administration into a caretaker regime. The President's personal prestige, already diminished by Watergate and its aftermath, has been dealt a fresh blow by the Agnew resignation.

Mr. Nixon's chief achievement — detente with Russia — has been gravely compromised by the fighting in the Near East. So the best the Nixon Administration can do in the next three years is to rebuild public confidence a little while saving some elements of Big Two cooperation by putting detente underground for the time being.

The drop in personal authority is particularly striking. Watergate has already driven the President's standing down from a commanding posture less than a year ago to a position of weakness.

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THE COURTS are still out on the issue of the taped recordings of Mr. Nixon's conversations and phone calls. If the Supreme Court denies the President's claim that he is constitutionally bound to keep the tapes secret, his lustre will be further dimmed.

Against that background, the resignation of Vice President Spiro Agnew after copping a plea is bound to reflect adversely on Mr. Nixon.

More importantly, there is the way Mr. Nixon reacted when charges of bribery and extortion were first levelled at the Vice President. The President kept visible distance between himself and Agnew, thus

confirming the impression the Vice President was under a cloud. But the President insisted the charges against Agnew did not relate to his service as Vice President, thus implicitly clearing himself.

Now, however, it becomes known that the charges did indeed cover the period of Agnew's service as Vice President. According to the statement submitted by the Justice Department, Agnew was in fact receiving payments as late as December of last year.

So once again there is a case of the President failing to tackle a moral issue squarely. Once again Mr. Nixon is seen to have been running a tricky pattern which has as its only logic self-protection.

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NOT EVERYTHING, to be sure, is lost. The President can make a comeback in public opinion. In that connection it would be particularly useful if he voluntarily yielded the relevant portions of the White House tapes to special Watergate prosecutor Archibald Cox. That would at least eliminate the prospect of an impeachment and leave Mr. Nixon able to keep the machinery ticking over.

As to detente, big showy summit meetings are not on for a while, and the administration will have to compromise on laws pushing trade on a big scale. But the accommodation between Eastern and Western Europe can go forward quietly.

Even these limited gains will be foregone, however, if Mr. Nixon continues efforts to assert himself against the Congress, the courts and large elements of public opinion.