

Too Cool for Comfort

By Russell Baker

WASHINGTON, Oct. 29—President Nixon worries too much about coolness. He seems to believe that coolness is a good quality. He talks about having it himself in large quantity.

"The tougher things get, the cooler I get," he told his national television audience the other night, sounding like an overheated volcano. After the election victory last year he spoke in the same spirit to a newspaper interviewer.

He did not spend valuable time watching television, as Lyndon Johnson had done, he said. It tempted men to hot, hyperthyroid views of the world, which he could not allow to distort his own cool, calm deliberations about the world as it really was.

When the White House people discuss the President in public, they often emphasize his coolness. He is frequently described in moments when decisions are being made as "the coolest man in the room."

This is surely the sycophantic praise of courtiers eager to please their principal by telling the world what they know he likes to hear, even if it isn't so. Successful Presidential hangers-on almost always have a nasty talent for striking the delusionary note that will ingratiate them with their bosses.

The fact, of course, is that President Nixon has a very short fuse. When the spark hits the powder he goes sky high, as he did in his news conference Friday.

In his earlier political career he used to acknowledge that he had a hot temper, that he occasionally "blew his stack," as he used to put it. The stories of the legendary stack-blowing in Caracas after he escaped from the famous mobbing in 1958 are part of the lore of men who have followed him over the long haul.

The question, however, is not whether he is cool, but why it seems to matter so much to him. We have had two unashamedly hot-tempered Presidents in recent times—Truman and Eisenhower—and we don't seem to have held it a weakness in them.

Coolness is an idea whose time seemed to come in the Kennedy era. It had something to do with shorter answers in Presidential press conferences, with narrow lapels and a good

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fit through the waist, with an occasional crackle of dry wit and—

But all that is silly, of course. Meaningless, imprecise. It doesn't get to the essence of the famous Kennedy style. But what does? In politics, the Kennedy style pledged us to go anywhere, pay any price, bear any burden. It made us adventurers on a new frontier. Was this coolness? Surely not. Surely it was hot and hyperthyroid.

Still, the idea of coolness fetched the Kennedy people. It must have sounded good, being called cool. There was a great deal of talk and writing in the early nineteen-sixties about the coolness of it all, even during the 1962 missile showdown when the White House bet Khrushchev he wouldn't dare put up the hottest war ever held.

Afterwards, the memoirs agreed that when things were at their hottest, President Kennedy was the coolest man in the room.

When Lyndon Johnson ran in 1964 he exploited the notion that Barry Goldwater was dangerously hot-tempered. Whose finger did we want in position to "mash that button," he used to ask. Cool Lyndon's or hot Barry's? As we now know, between speeches about the danger of hot Barry mashing the button, cool Lyndon was already quietly embarking on the most disastrous American war since 1861.

And now we have President Nixon insisting that he is the coolest of them all. He has what it takes, he tells us. Coolness.

At this moment somebody in the White House could strike a small blow for reason by telling the President the truth. "Mr. President," he might say, "you are kidding yourself about being cool. You are not cool. You have a short temper, and it gets you into trouble sometimes.

"The beauty part, however, is that you don't have to worry about not being cool, because there have been several uncool Presidents who were just fine with the American people."

We all know that nobody in the White House would dare tell the President he isn't cool, and we know why. It is because they all believe it.