

Visitors From the White House

By Dorothy McCardle

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The theme song was "Happy Birthday" and there to play it personally Tuesday night was an expansive and jocular President Nixon, out on the town for the second time in less than a week.

Sen. Wallace F. Bennett (R-Utah) was celebrating his 75th birthday at a surprise party in the Congressional Club on New Hampshire Avenue NW when Mr. Nixon turned up unexpectedly about 9:45. With him were Mrs. Nixon and presidential Press Secretary Ronald Ziegler.

The guests, who had finished dinner, included eight of the 15 U.S. senators who had met with Mr. Nixon at the White House earlier in the evening to question him about Watergate.

"We have visitors from the White House," someone announced, and as 85 heads turned to look, in walked the Nixons and Ziegler. The throng stood and applauded.

The President exhibited much the same humor and informality he showed in a surprise visit last Thursday night to a Nevada State Society dinner honoring his wife, Pat.

(Some observers interpreted Mr. Nixon's recent actions as a calculated effort to publicly demonstrate that he has every intention of riding out Watergate and that his ability to govern has not been impaired by the stress of this and other crises ranging from energy to the Midwest.)

After greeting the Ben-

netts, Mr. Nixon strode to the podium where he explained that he would have been there sooner except that he had gone to the wrong address.

He thought the party was at the Capitol Hill Club, a Republican stronghold near the House office buildings. But when he arrived there, he said in jest, he knew that wasn't the place because "all that was there was a bunch of drunks," a remark apparently for the benefit of the teetotaling Bennetts who are Mormons.

Mr. Nixon then paid tribute to Bennett, a 23-year veteran of the Senate. The President compared him to other elder statesmen age 75 and over, citing Mao Tse-tung, Cho En-lai, President Eisenhower, French President Charles de Gaulle, German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill.

Behind them, he noted, were wives who, like Mrs. Bennett, had been strong helpmates.

He had a special word for Bennett's leadership as ranking Republican on the Senate Finance Committee.

You have to be awfully good to sit across from Sen. [Russell] Long [chairman, who was also at the dinner]," Mr. Nixon noted.

Then, to everyone's surprise, Mr. Nixon walked over to the piano, sat down and, with gusto, played a chorus of "Happy Birthday."

The guests sang along, but apparently not heartily enough for Mr. Nixon. Stopping long enough to chide them gently to "sing louder," he played a second cho-

rus. The next time though, they did.

Bennett appeared to be moved by Mr. Nixon's visit, especially, he noted, since the President's meetings with senators on Watergate would continue Wednesday.

Bennett, who had been among senators at the White House Monday and was going again yesterday afternoon, said earlier that "The President told us that he hasn't done anything wrong."

"I have a lot of questions I'm going to ask him Wednesday. But I can tell you that I think things have turned the corner. The spirit and the atmosphere of the White House have changed."

Sen. Hugh Scott (R-Pa.), the Senate minority leader, hurried in late for the dinner because he had been tied up at the White House in an earlier meeting with the President.

Of the senators' group meeting with Mr. Nixon Scott said "The President got 14 different ideas from 14 different senators. It was a good session."

Some of the senators present said their mail, which had been running heavily against the President, has now declined and that in some cases the tide has turned in Mr. Nixon's favor. "Things are turning around," said Sen. J. Glenn Beall (R-Md.).

Sen. John L. McClellan (D-Ark.), on his trip to the White House Monday, had found the President "in a good mood—relaxed. There is a revival of optimism about this whole situation."

Sen. James B. Allen (D-Ala.), who also had been at the White House Monday,

said the President "gave every indication he is going to make a full disclosure about Watergate."

"We had a good session with him," he added. "I did not feel the purpose of the visit to be one of inquisition on my part. It was a friendly affair on all sides."

Sen. Roman L. Hruska (R-Neb.) said he would go to the White House yesterday afternoon "with an open mind."

Sen. Charles H. Percy (R-Ill.), who was to go to the White House yesterday, arrived at the party about the same time as Tom C. Korologos, deputy assistant to the President for congressional relations.

"This reaching out to Congress and the people by the President is very important," said Percy. "Before, the subject of Watergate was forbidden. Now it's being brought out into the open at last."

Did things seem better at the White House, someone asked Korologos.

"I'd think that's fair to say," he said with a grin.

Mrs. Bennett, who had called it "just a family party—we're going to have a good time together and not talk about Watergate at all," had had no luck with the surprise aspect of the event.

Her guests had been spilling the beans to the senator in advance.

But he was surprised to find all five of the Wallace children there: Robert from Arlington, Frances Jeppson from Bethesda, Rosemary Fletcher from New Jersey and Wallace G. and David from Salt Lake City.