

Nixon's Last Campaign

By James Reston

WASHINGTON, Nov. 15—President Nixon took a chance when he invited the Senators and Representatives to the White House to question him about Watergate, but he has made some progress in these strange and unprecedented efforts to restore confidence in his battered Administration.

The chance he took was fairly obvious. The Congress was beginning the long and delicate procedure of impeachment. In this process, members of the House of Representatives would be, in effect, a grand jury, deciding whether to indict him for high crimes and misdemeanors, and members of the Senate were potential judges. Therefore, inviting them to the White House to talk things over was a little dicey, for in a way he risked the charge that he was not only refusing to meet in private with the Senate Watergate committee members who had studied the evidence, but that he was actually lobbying the jurors from the House and the judges from the Senate.

So far the evidence is that he has dealt with this problem very well. He started poorly by talking to the first delegation from the Hill about the Middle East. This seemed to some to be a diversion, if not a filibuster, but by the time the first Senators called on him, he seemed more confident and relaxed.

He took them up to the lovely sunny California Room in the White House. He greeted them individually by name, and showed them his hi-fi console, and even said that when he used it, he preferred "tapes," because they were more audible and accurate.

Members present agree that he denied all charges of personal involvement in the burglaries or the cover-up, and offered to hand over all documents relevant to criminal action by his associates, but what was more important about these confrontations was that the President apparently removed many serious doubts about his own personal control of himself and his problem.

This, more than anything else, has been the concealed anxiety of Congressional leaders. For weeks and even months, the President seemed to be isolated and defiant, brooding with his staff, and roving to his retreats in the Maryland mountains, Florida or California.

The suddenly he would appear to brief the leaders of Congress on the latest potential disaster. Two incidents illustrate the problem. When he called the Congressional leaders to the White House to explain why he had called a worldwide alert of the armed forces at the critical point in the Middle East crisis, he was composed, solemn and factual.

Tip O'Neill of Massachusetts, the Democratic majority leader of the

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House, was so impressed by the President's presentation of the Soviet threat to intervene in the Middle East that when he got back to the House and found members saying the whole thing was a phony diversion from Watergate, he took to the floor and rebuked members of his own party.

Yet a few days before, in another meeting between the Congressional leaders and the President, the reaction was quite different. At this meeting the purpose was to explain the political and strategic problem in the first stages of the Middle Eastern war. Secretary of State Kissinger was explaining the facts. The President was in a jovial mood.

The Congressional leaders were puzzled by this performance, and all the more puzzled when they got back to their offices and were greeted by special messengers bearing a letter from Vice President Agnew saying that, by the time they received this, Mr. Agnew would have resigned and thanking them for their support and courtesy. So why was the President so jolly, since he must have known what was coming?

This is the sort of thing that has been worrying people around here rather than the specific facts about whether the President knew about the burglaries or the cover-ups, and he is in better shape now with the people on Capitol Hill because he has come out of isolation, submitted to questioning, and handled the questions calmly and candidly.

More important, he has handled himself under most difficult circumstances in a cool and rational manner. He hasn't offered any new information, or dealt with the substance of the charges. He hasn't answered the charges about Watergate, but he has reassured a lot of people about himself.

This has clearly helped him personally, and minimized the deep but publicly unspoken doubts about his health, judgment and stability. Also, he has done so well in these confrontations with the Congress that he is now going sled-length the other way into speeches all over the place, or at least all over the South, flying to Florida to talk to the A.P. managing editors, flying back to his place in Key Biscayne, and then up again and down again to Macon, Ga., back to Key Biscayne, and finally back to Memphis to meet with the Republican Governors.

Keeping up with him is a puzzle, and who runs the Government meanwhile, is not clear; but you can't blame a man for trying to save his honor and his life, and this is now obviously what he's trying, and trying with some success, to do.