

James Reston

The Politics of The Nixon Budget

Washington

RICHARD NIXON has endured all these years because he bends but never breaks. He likes to sound rigid and consistent in his rigidity, but in practice he makes a virtue of flexibility and inconsistency, and his new budget is just the latest evidence of the point.

His budget is not primarily an economic but a political document. In contrast to a year ago, when he was insisting that the Congress abide by strict spending ceilings and threatening to impound funds that broke through his limits or violated his priorities, this year he was not defying the Congress but offering to compromise with it, and indicating that he would spend whatever was necessary in order to avoid a recession.

In order to dramatize the spectacular change in the politics of the budget, it is necessary to go back ten years.



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AT THAT TIME, President Kennedy had just been murdered, and President Johnson was at his ranch preparing his first budget for the Congress. That, too, was a "political" budget.

By accident, I happened to be a weekend guest there and Mr. Johnson had a problem he wanted to discuss with John Connally. So he put his wife and me in his helicopter and flew us over to Austin, and put the question to Connally: Should he send to the Congress a budget of over \$100 billion.

No, said Connally without the slightest hesitation. That would look bad, might even seem reckless,

so we all flew back to the ranch, and Mr. Johnson a few days later sent up a popular but phony budget, just under the hundred billion.

It is this same old story. Politics remains the same, but the economy of the country changes. Now Mr. Nixon, ten years later, didn't even bother to try to keep the budget under \$300 billion, but suggested \$304.4 billion, and allowed his assistants to indicate that even this spectacular sum would be "busted" if necessary to check a slump in the economy.

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IN A WAY, Mr. Nixon in 1974 was more honest with his budget than Mr. Johnson in 1964, but both had a political purpose. Mr. Johnson wanted to persuade the Congress that he was not a "big spender," so he fiddled with the figures to keep the budget down. Mr. Nixon wanted to persuade the Congress that he wasn't a budget balancer at any cost and would put economic stability ahead of ideology, whatever the cost.

The reasons for his switch from last year's fiscal austerity to fiscal flexibility, from defiance to cooperation with the Congress are fairly clear. The energy crisis, the inflation, the rise in prices and interest rates, the loss of jobs and the general loss of confidence in the government all created a new situation, so Mr. Nixon compromised.

Also, he had to send his budget to a House of Representatives which is considering whether to indict, and a Senate which may consider whether to convict him of crimes or misdemeanors against the Republic.

It is not surprising, therefore, that he sent them a budget that would minimize his conflicts with the Congress, which may soon have to sit in judgment on the Watergate scandals. Whatever else Mr. Nixon is, he is a good politician, who looks after himself.

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WHEN HE APPEARED before both houses of the Congress in his State of the Union address, having served in both houses and presided over the Senate as Vice President, Mr. Nixon told them that he was not going to resign the presidency, but that he would cooperate with the Congress.

This is still his strength and his hope. At one point in his career, he defied the Communists in Moscow and Peking as his enemies, and then negotiated with them as his allies in a "new world order." He is now doing the same thing with the Congress.

The Congress is exasperated by all this but doesn't quite know what to do with him. He is in terrible trouble, but he has given the Democratic majority in Congress a budget that is both liberal and ambiguous.

In short, while his critics watch him carefully on the TV and wonder what he thinks in the night, Mr. Nixon keeps bending and compromising, and waiting. This is how he achieved the presidency in the first