



Mr. Nixon Calls A Cabinet Meeting

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SUPPOSE they called a cabinet meeting and nobody came? Well, last week it almost happened.

The three senior departmental chiefs and two lesser fry were absent from the session which President Nixon held last Thursday. And that says a lot about how the shadow of impeachment affects the way Washington works these days.

Normally cabinet meetings are called to bear public witness that the President is on the stick, tending to the national business in an orderly way. Besides the cabinet meeting, Mr. Nixon had a morning marked by absolute routine.

It would be hard to imagine a schedule more perfectly calculated to convey the assurance of business going on as usual, unaffected by the brouhaha about Watergate. Just in case anybody had any doubts, the White House press spokesman, Gerald Warren, said that the cabinet did not discuss Watergate or impeachment.

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SO WHAT did they discuss? Well, according to Warren, there was a general discussion of the President's program. The secretary of commerce, Fred Dent, talked about the trade bill.

The secretary of health, education and welfare, Caspar Weinberger, talked about the new comprehensive health insurance program. He also rapped a little about the new welfare reform package which his department is preparing.

Finally another cabinet member mentioned with approval the President's statement the night before, that the 1974 elections would be decided by "peace and prosperity."

Well, how about the economy? Didn't

they talk about that? As a matter of fact, no. George Shultz, the secretary of the treasury, was in Chile attending a meeting.

How about the Middle East and relations with the Soviet Union? Well, no. Henry Kissinger, the secretary of state, was returning from Moscow.

How about national security and the volunteer army and troops in Europe? Did they talk about that? Well, no. Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger couldn't come to the cabinet meeting because he had previously scheduled a press conference.

Okay. So Shultz and Kissinger and Schlesinger have special responsibilities. But the rest of the cabinet is working as a team, isn't it?

Sure. Only Attorney General William Saxbe had to go to Quantico to address a graduating class at the FBI Academy. And Secretary of Transportation Claude Brinegar had to be in Mexico for an "international conclave."

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WELL, the President could have briefed the cabinet on the economy and national security himself, couldn't he? Maybe. But there's a lot of evidence that the President really isn't all that clued-in on what secretaries Shultz and Kissinger and Schlesinger have been doing.

But if Mr. Nixon isn't concentrating on the economy and foreign policy and defense, what does concern him? Well, the truth is that he's concerned — and rightly concerned — about just what the cabinet meeting was supposed to gloss over. He's worried about impeachment and he's fighting for survival.