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By Wendy Cortesi

Impeachment Mood: Government Works, The Nation Waits

In Washington these days it is like living in a vast court room. In Congress the stage is being set for the crucial impeachment vote and in the White House a visitor quickly senses that its occupants feel as if they were waiting in the dock. As to the President, as one of his advisers put it, "It is in his nature to participate compulsively in matters affecting his survival." It is not surprising therefore that many people here and abroad are asking whether

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and how under these circumstances this nation is governed.

There is no simple answer to why there has been no serious breakdown in the functioning of this government, which under the American system depends so heavily on presidential leadership, except to acknowledge first of all that the American government is a much more stable institution than it is usually given credit for. Secondly, however deplorable Mr. Nixon's judgment was in the choice of his immediate entourage, the men he selected to run the principal governmental departments proved to be remarkably felicitous. Dr. Kissinger is widely considered one of the greatest Secretaries of State, Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger is a strong, independent minded, highly qualified expert in military affairs, the recently departed Secretary of the Treasury George Shultz is an economist in his own right and did not need much presidential guidance, Roy Ash, the Director of the Office of Budget and Management, has proved a capable manager and Caspar Weinberger, the Secretary for Health, Education and Welfare, has churned out some remarkable new legislation. It is also true that the civil service is a far more effective machine here than it has been given credit for. One of the leading British civil servants recently developed the theory that the civil service reacts to its masters in sexual terms. In a weak government or with a weak minister it asserts its masculinity, but when up against strong superiors, it reacts in a more acquiescent feminine way. Whether this comparison holds in a women's lib era is another matter, but it seems to me to have a good deal of truth to it in this capital these days. Thirdly, President Nixon has been participating in the decision making process more than one might perceive on the face of his preoccupation with Watergate, even though to the distress of many insiders he tends

to alternate between intense involvement and abrupt seclusion. His remoteness from governing is nothing new. He has always preferred to delegate much of his authority, in fact too much, and he has not changed. What has changed is that after the forced demise of Haldeman and Ehrlichman the dictatorial uses of power from the center have declined, and cabinet ministers, all loyal to the President and to the cause of government stability, have been acting more like running their own dukedoms. Secretary Kissinger was given an unusual latitude by the President and by now, partly because of his success and political shrewdness, partly because of the decline of the President's prestige, has developed such personal support in Congress and in the country that it has given him a power position of his own. He, Schlesinger, Admiral Moorer, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and Director of the CIA Colby have been meeting for lunch every Friday to discuss the world—but without the President. It was also Kissinger and Schlesinger and Moorer who, apparently in the absence of the President, initially decided to call for a nuclear alert during the Middle East crisis last year. Whether a more sustained participation in the SALT discussions would have resulted

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in overcoming the division within the administration, that still exist, is difficult to know.

In matters of domestic policy Roy Ash has become the most powerful man. He is instinctively mindful of the fact that one of his predecessors was fired by Mr. Nixon because he demanded too much of the President's time and is careful to avoid such a mistake. He is careful to enumerate the few times he met with the President to discuss budgetary matters since last August. But he also frankly admits that the crucial 50 budgetary decisions were dealt with by written communication with the President. In each memorandum he set out objectively the pros and cons and over a period of four weeks the decisions, initiated by the President, were returned to Mr. Ash at the rate of two to three a day. The procedure confirms the remark of a public official who once referred to the methods of the Nixon ad-

ministration as a set of compartments connected by memoranda.

The Nixon Administration has produced some good and some bad legislation, but if in the end Congress passes a national health insurance bill, Mr. Nixon will deserve a share of the credit. The chances that such a bill will ultimately win approval are good for Senator Kennedy and Congressman Wilbur Mills have made some major concessions, which have substantially narrowed the difference between their own and the administration's bill.

But to govern also means to be able to influence Congress on a broad front. Mr. Nixon's task with a Congress that is dominated by the opposition was not easy from the start and now with his own party deserting him more and more, it will become almost impossible. After this year's congressional elections he may well be confronted with such a Democratic majority that Congress will have the votes to overturn any presidential veto.

Of course, increasingly the President's weakness in Congress is going to affect foreign policy. The drastic cuts in aid to Indochina are one example. The difficulties over foreign trade legislation are another. But so far the question as to whether the President is still governing has not affected anybody's policies yet. When American Ambassador Walter Stoessel, for instance, saw Mr. Brezhnev after the recent Kissinger visit, the Soviet leader was again emphatic about expecting Mr. Nixon to come to Moscow in June as planned. Those who are wondering whether they may be dealing with a temporary regime, are nevertheless thinking much more in terms of American power than in terms of the temporary weakness of the American presidency. In a curious way the world, just as the American nation, is waiting in quiet suspense the final outcome. What is making it easier for the Administration to coast along on its earlier momentum is that the country seems to sense that it is undergoing a momentous test of its resiliency. There are no mass demonstrations against the President.

The men in government, who continue to carry on bravely in spite of their demoralization, also deserve huge credit. Many of them feel, as one put it, "Like a doctor who looks at his hands several times a day to check whether he did not get the disease."

But there is a limit to demoralization and living in uncertainty. The longer this sickening drama continues in the Washington courtroom the less it comes to matter to people whether the President is impeached or not and the more how soon this nightmare will be over.