

# A Leaderless Government

The withdrawal of President Nixon from active control and direction of the government is beginning to worry Republican leaders in Congress almost as much as the tidal wave of impeachment.

Virtually all contact has been severed between President Nixon's congressional leaders and the White House. Indeed, mesmerized by the fatal turn of events since the House Judiciary Committee voted its impeachment articles with overwhelming bipartisan majorities last week, the White House is also dangerously insulating itself from vital decision-making and workaday operations of its own agencies and departments. Only foreign policy seems immune and only because Secretary of State Henry Kissinger has unique standing.

As one high-ranking Republican leader in the House told us: "They have disappeared into the White House bunkers looking for an impeachment strategy that doesn't exist."

The potentially critical loss of administration involvement in non-impeachment congressional business was dramatized last Tuesday on the floor of the House. No Oval Office signal was received on the budget-busting mass transit conference report. The bill, carrying \$800 million more for the current fiscal year than the White House wanted, was ticketed for routine passage.

At the last minute, Rep. John Anderson of Illinois, chairman of the House

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Republican Conference, contacted Rep. Chalmers Wylie of Ohio, a Republican member of the mass transit subcommittee of the House Banking Committee. Together, they decided that a motion to recommend the bill to conference with the Senate might pass. Wylie offered it. Anderson spoke for it and the bill was sent back to conference.

"That would have been a White House operation for sure, but we never heard a word," Anderson told us.

Likewise, within the administration, Cabinet members who have had only one formal meeting with Mr. Nixon since mid-June are steering as clear as they can from asking White House decisions on new policy.

Three Cabinet members told us they are spending much of their time outside Washington, concentrating when here on drafting their new budget requests for next year and avoiding contact with top presidential aides inside the White House.

The mood was summed up by one: "I don't even think about impeachment

because if I did I might find myself pulling the ripcord and bailing out."

Even in the desperately critical area of the economy President Nixon has been avoiding all but cursory involvement. He has called a couple of highly publicized but meaningless sessions with big business and private economists. Far more important, however, he has had not one single private huddle with Dr. Arthur Burns, the chairman of the Federal Reserve Board, since Jan. 1. In all that time, Burns has been to the White House only for a few formal meetings of the Quadriga, the government's top-level economic policy body.

Noting the absence of the prestigious Burns at the much-ballyhooped July 11 White House economic session with top industrialists and private economists, Mr. Nixon in an attempt at humor said: "Arthur talks to God and occasionally allows me to talk to him." What Mr. Nixon did not say was that Dr. Burns was not even invited.

Time and again these past few weeks the President has abruptly can-

celled or postponed one meeting after another with his top aides: Secretary of the Treasury William Simon on the morning of July 30, Secretary of Housing James Lynn on July 24, both rescheduled, and two meetings of his economic advisers last Thursday which still have not been held.

Each of those postponements directly resulted from the President's impeachment battle.

Yet, despite the desperate 24-hour-a-day search for a way out, the impeachment noose continues to tighten. One top-level Republican strategist is talking about "salvaging" some Republicans now leaning toward a pro-impeachment vote, not to prevent impeachment but to make the vote slightly more respectable for the President.

A Southern Democratic leader now sees a better-than-even chance that the entire Democratic delegations of North Carolina, Georgia and Alabama will end up voting for impeachment. A Northern pro-Nixon Republican counts only 28 Southern Democrats against impeachment from Maryland to Texas.

Thus, no matter how much the President continues to withdraw from the workaday operations of the federal government in pursuit of self-preservation, his search for salvation may be doomed. The coming months, then, will test a novel proposition: Whether the American government can run itself without direction from the top.