

Id Ohlsson

The Nixon Medical File

How sick is Richard Nixon?

Ever since his sudden pardon, there have been guarded and contradictory hints that Nixon may be on the brink of a medical crisis. For a time, President Ford's closest aides privately justified the pardon as a gesture of compassion aimed at shoring up the fallen Chief Executive's failing health. And old Nixon loyalists, who had once insisted that the ex-President was weathering his seventh crisis in heroic form, suddenly started to portray him as a haggard man beset by a mind-numbing depression. "He is a very bewildered man," noted one former White House retainer. "It is not an exaggeration to say that somewhere along the way he lost touch with the realities of the political and legal world around him."

As if to underscore the dangers, Nixon's chronic phlebitis flared up once again last week. And after flying cross-country to treat the case, Maj. Gen. Walter Tkach reported that Nixon had refused to enter a hospital, saying: "If I go into the hospital, I'll never come out alive." Tkach said his "ravaged" patient showed no sign of mental imbalance, but is suffering from tension that could possibly result in a fatal attack of phlebitis—the formation of blood clots in veins, with the danger that they can break loose and block the flow of blood to the heart or lungs.

The standard treatment for phlebitis is anticoagulant drugs, which must be administered intravenously in a hospital at first and then can be taken orally. It is "critical," Tkach told NEWSWEEK's Rich Thomas, that Nixon should begin this treatment. Clearly distraught at the

plight of a man he considers a friend as well as a patient, Tkach said he did not feel he could overrule Nixon's refusal and had not discussed the case with Pat Nixon "for fear of frightening her." "I guess she'll read this now and I guess that's good," Tkach said; as for himself, "I'll be seeing him at least once a week, and I'll just try to get him to go to a hospital."

In general, Tkach said, Nixon's condition is "much worse than when I saw him two weeks ago. He just has no bounce, no responsiveness at all." Resignation had been a "spiritual body blow," the doctor said, and Ford's pardon had been "no help whatsoever . . . He's just under tremendous tension. It's going to take a miracle for him to recover."

A GLOOMY ASSESSMENT

Other visitors, however, told other stories. After Tkach left San Clemente, communications director Kenneth Clawson spent three hours with Nixon and told NEWSWEEK's John J. Lindsay that Nixon seemed animated, and in no visible pain and occasionally strolled around his office, favoring his left leg but not actually limping. So the question remained: Was Nixon really in danger, or were his friends simply trying to justify the pardon and win him lenient treatment in coming court battles?

Whatever the answer, there is no doubt that the ex-President's family, friends and old staffers worked actively to convince Ford that Nixon's health was at best fragile. Former White House counsel Fred Buzhardt made a quick trip to San Clemente, returning with a gloomy assessment of Nixon's somber

NATIONAL AFFAIRS

mood. Julie Eisenhower's "sadness," reported one family friend, "was communicated to Ford—and greatly disturbed the President." Ford also sought out the advice of two members of Nixon's inner circle to determine the true state of his ex-boss's health and spirits. One of his informants was Dr. Tkach; the second, reliable sources said, was Edward Cox. "Depression," one of them reportedly told Ford, "becomes dangerous when it persists over a long period of time."

After Ford's decision to grant Nixon absolution touched off a nationwide eruption of protest, the Nixon family quickly moved to drum up support for the pardon. One relative (later identified by the Knight newspapers as Edward

David Eisenhower—who said, among other things, that Nixon had actually been bedridden on the Annenberg estate. Early in the week, Nixon had in fact played a round of golf on Annenberg's private course. According to a companion, he seemed to be relaxed and enjoying himself—though he complained of tenderness in his leg. On noticing some swelling at the end of the round, an aide suggested calling a doctor. A cardiovascular specialist named Dr. John Lungren was thereupon summoned from Long Beach to examine the ex-President. He advised elevating the leg, and said he would look at it again in a few days. The swelling was nowhere near the elephantine dimensions later suggest-

Recurring phlebitis may also be a symptom of a hidden cancer in the stomach, lungs or pancreas. But since Nixon's history of phlebitis dates back more than a decade, experts believe that any cancer would have shown clear symptoms by now. The second clot, however, was read as a sign that Nixon's case is not about to clear up. If the disease worsens, the inflamed vein might have to be tied off surgically.

In any case, Tkach did not then seem alarmed. He prescribed medication and rest, and left Nixon in the care of an Army medical corpsman. Nor did any buzzers sound around Casa Pacifica. Nixon's children did not rush to his side. His old chums Bebe Rebozo and Robert H. Abplanalp were noticeable only by their absence. And his secretary Rose Mary Woods was staying in Washington for a charity ball. "Never," noted one of her friends, "have I heard Rose in a more mellow mood."

As for Nixon's mental stability, the available evidence was equally ambiguous. One confidant who had seen Nixon a week prior to the pardon and had pronounced him quite chipper suddenly recalled that the ex-President had really been in a deep depression. "The aloneness is a curse," the visitor sighed. Attorney Benton Becker, who shepherded the pardon from the White House to Casa Pacifica and reported at the time that Nixon "seemed fit," changed his emphasis. The ex-President, he said last week, had looked "tired, old, lonely and depressed." A Republican leader who is close to Ford said: "I'm convinced the President is concerned about the possibility of a Nixon suicide."

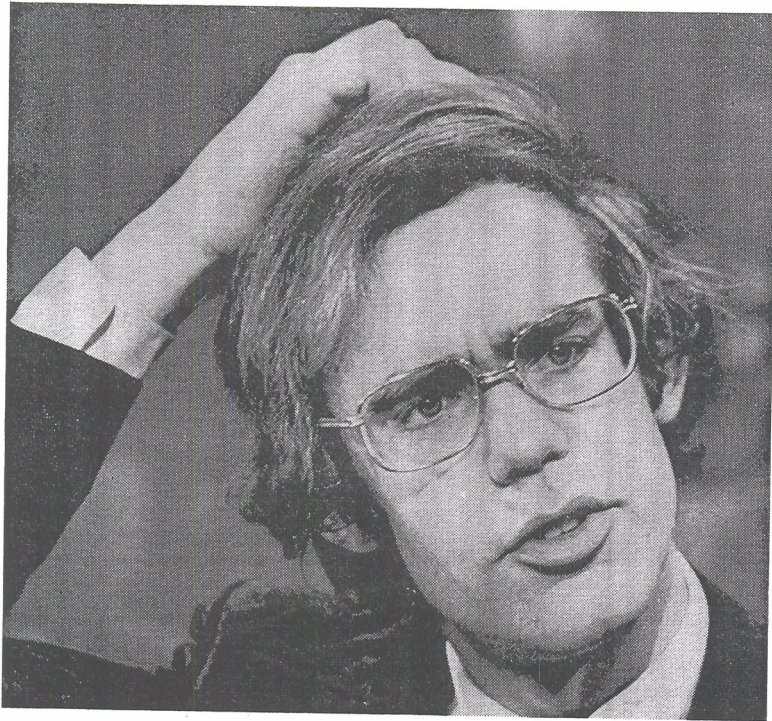
SELF-DESTRUCTIVE?

Others were not so sure. To Dr. Arnold A. Hutschnecker, a New York City psychiatrist who has known Nixon since the 1950's (both men maintain that the doctor has never treated Nixon for mental ills), the option of suicide is not open to the ex-President. "A man who has been in the limelight, not just of one nation but of the whole world, cannot commit suicide," Hutschnecker noted last week. "He doesn't even have that freedom because it is a disgraceful act."

By one interpretation, Nixon's balkiness at accepting treatment for his phlebitis might be seen as self-destructive. But no long-distance observer could do more than speculate; it was also true that as recently as last week he felt well enough to play a round of golf and enjoy it. By the weekend, the subject was so thoroughly muddled that White House aides were suggesting that Nixon's health had never been an issue in the pardon, and that nobody had ever discussed it with Ford.

There could be no doubt, however, that Nixon was feeling real pain—both physical and emotional. "It's going to be a long time," said one of his relatives last week, "before he finds peace with himself."

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David Eisenhower: Drumming up support for the pardon

UPI

Cox) called the Associated Press in Washington to report that Nixon had fallen into a "deep depression that even the pardon had not lightened." And David Eisenhower went on NBC's "Today" show to say that the new bout of phlebitis had swelled his father-in-law's left leg to twice normal size, and that Nixon could no longer play golf or unwind.

The abrupt ending of the family's reticence encouraged the notion that the ex-President's health had deteriorated more than anyone was letting on. But Nixon was resisting his doctor's attentions—by one account, he wouldn't even wear an elastic bandage. Newsmen gathered in Palm Springs, where Nixon was spending a brief holiday at the estate of Walter Annenberg, an old friend and financial angel. But the Nixon entourage provided no answers, and Nixon himself chose to avoid the press.

When the details of Nixon's ailment began to trickle out, they did not quite square with the public account of Da-

vid Eisenhower. As Tkach was to describe it later to *NEWSWEEK*, the leg was swollen enough so that Nixon couldn't pull his trouser cuff over the knee for the examination and had to drop his pants instead.

A SECOND CLOT

Thus, to all appearances, the relapse did not look very serious. But after Dr. Tkach arrived from the East, the diagnosis changed. Nixon, he reported, had developed a second blood clot in a vein above his left knee (by one account, the great saphenous vein). It was nothing to be trifled with; the primary danger of phlebitis is that such a clot may break free and lodge in the heart (as a coronary embolism, usually quickly fatal) or the lungs (a pulmonary embolism, also potentially deadly). The standard monitor for patients with phlebitis is a test called a lung scan, administered in a hospital, but Nixon refused to be hospitalized.