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The New Badge of Courage

Paul 4/11/77

The difficulty, we are told, is that societal attitudes change. Things that were formerly condoned, even encouraged, fall out of fashion. "Time makes ancient good uncouth," and so on.

Thus we are urged to be compassionate toward (or even pin hero's medals to the chest of) Richard Helms, the former CIA chief who lied under oath and got caught.

Only a tiny handful of Helms's defenders—and they are legion—ask us to believe that this devoted public servant didn't really lie. What most of them ask is that we understand that he was in a very difficult situation, torn between his oath to protect the secrets of the CIA and his oath to tell the truth to senators who were considering his appointment as ambassador to Iran.

And most of all, we are asked to remember that "times have changed," that it isn't fair to judge 1973 offenses by 1977 standards. If the arguments are familiar, it is because we have heard them before.

We shouldn't hound Richard Nixon out of office; we were told, because John Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson and others committed similar offenses and got away.

Spiro Agnew's fall came not because he committed a whole catalogue of corrupt acts but because he got caught in a time wary of changing values. He, and Marvin Mandel, his successor as governor of Maryland, only did what came naturally (before times changed) for Baltimore politicians.

Likewise with Bert Lance, the scores of beneficiaries of Korean philanthropist Tongsun Park and Lord knows who else.

The people upon whom we are urged to look with compassion have one thing in common: They are "somebody." By the same token, those doing most of the urging have in common the fact that they are long-time friends of these "somebodies."

Since I am nobody, and since I am not a close friend of anyone who is "somebody," perhaps I could be in-

cluded a modest proposal. In consideration of the fact that times change and, with them, our values, we might consider a periodic wholesale amnesty. Say every two years.

If any "somebody" goes for two years without getting caught, he should be granted an automatic exemption from the new morality. His slate should be wiped clean.

The obvious objection is that such a plan, applied solely to "somebodies," constitutes a double standard that, in itself, runs against the new morality.

Naturally, I've thought of that. Taking a listing in the Congressional Directory as a pretty fair indicator of "somebodiness"—at least in the government—there are approximately 12,800 "somebodies" among us. Figuring on the basis of a national population of 220 million, that works out to about 17,187 ordinary folk for every "somebody."

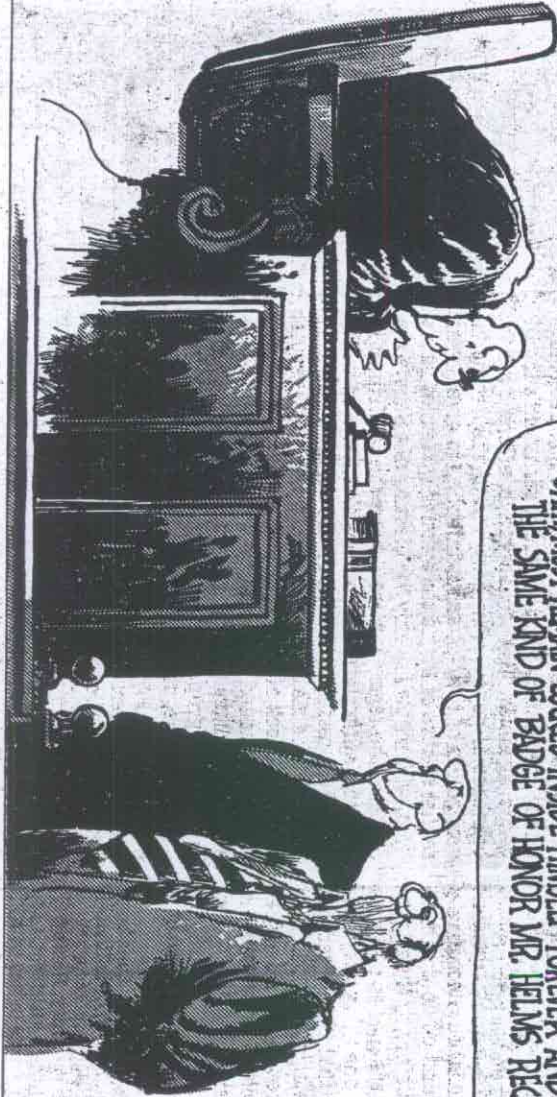
What I propose, in the interest of fairness, is that every time a "somebody" has his slate wiped clean, simi-

lar forgiveness should be awarded—perhaps on the basis of a lottery—to 17,187 of the rest of us. The lucky winners could then confess, without fear of punishment, that they had cheated on their income tax or padded their expense accounts or bought a suit of clothes from the "hot man."

A case could be made, of course, that the "nobodies" having less opportunity for corruption, are likely to be less corrupt than the "somebodies" and thus less needful of amnesty.

Therefore, as an alternative, I propose that the 17,187 ordinaries to be forgiven be chosen from among the ranks of prisoners, in which case their corruptness can be taken for granted. With our national prison population estimated at some 200,000, we would only have to forgive a dozen Helmses to clean out the prisons altogether. I'm sure American ingenuity could find another source of license plates.

YOUR HONOR, MY CLIENT SUBMITS THAT IT IS TRUE THAT HE GOT A LITTLE DRUNK, STOLE A CAR AND DROVE THROUGH A COIN LAUNDRY BUT SAYS THE REASONS FOR HIS BEHAVIOR DUE TO A PRIOR OATH MUST REMAIN LOCKED INSIDE HIMSELF FOREVER AND REQUESTS THE SAME KIND OF BADGE OF HONOR MR. HELMS RECEIVED!



By Wright for the Miami News