

WASH POST
8/9/74

The Solemnity of Change

Mantle of Power Is Passed Quietly

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When the day finally came, the anger and tensions and recriminations that had so enveloped this capital for weeks had been subdued in the solemnity of change. A sense of calm and a lenient spirit of conciliation began to emerge.

There was no chorus of jubilation in Washington and no cries for vengeance or retribution. There was an absence of turmoil, mobs, violence, massive protests.

The crowds that began gathering at the White House on Tuesday remained quiet, solemn and patient. They were witnesses to history, yes, and someday they would tell their grandchildren about it. But now on this Thursday, Aug. 8, 1974, they seemed more preoccupied by personal feelings of sorrow and sadness.

"Think of it," said a tourist from Wheaton, Ill. "The most beautiful building in the country, right across the street, and the man that lives there, that has worked all his life to get there, has to give it up. . . . It's a sad terrible thing, but he brought it all on himself. But it makes me sad that he has to be humiliated like this."

Another visitor who had driven up

from Myrtle Beach, S.C., was philosophical: "Our country will survive. In a way, this is like the Kennedy assassination. It is a sad time for everyone but we'll pull through."

By nightfall the crowd had swelled to huge proportions, blocking traffic on historic Pennsylvania Avenue, filling up beautiful Lafayette Park with its flower beds, benches and statues.

On Capitol Hill, where the Congress had been engaged in bitter debate for months and engaged, too, in a great constitutional struggle with the executive, there were bipartisan moves to grant immunity for the 37th man ever to serve as President of the United States.

Inside the White House, there were no last-minute theatrics, no public relations gimmicks, no coyness about what was to happen and no raucous remarks about enemies. Ronald L. Ziegler and Gerald L. Warren, who, as presidential spokesmen, had spent the last months in acrimonious confrontations with reporters, were now emotionally spent. They struggled to keep from crying as they performed their last tasks for the President.

It was an orderly thing, this passing of power. The decision was made

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THE NIXON YEARS

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known early, the time and place announced, the necessary meetings held. Vice President Ford met with Richard Nixon at midday and then canceled a political trip to the West. There were routine announcements of changes among federal judges, the Atomic Energy Commission, the National Science Foundation, the Combined Federal Campaign for the National Capital Area, the International Pacific Salmon Fisheries Commission.

The night before, Saul Pett of the Associated Press reported, there had been an emotional scene in the White House living quarters. The President had made his decision to resign and his family took it hard. Tears welled up in the eyes of Pat Nixon and Julie Nixon Eisenhower and when the President embraced his other daughter, Tricia Nixon Cox, she broke down and wept without control.

Late yesterday there were other farewells. The leaders of Congress were called in for a last meeting. A time was set aside last night for a chance to gether privately with old friends and supporters. It was civil and one with dignity.

In response, themes of hope for a kind of national reconciliation and healing were heard, even the hope that on leaving office after such a stormy passage, the President might at last achieve the goal that had been a campaign slogan in 1968—bringing the country together.

Democratic Gov. Milton Shapp of Pennsylvania composed an instant poem:

In the aftermath,

No wrath.

Just sorrow

And hope for tomorrow.

Another Democrat, Terry Sanford, the president of Duke University, expressed sympathy for Mr. Nixon and concluded: "It's time to gird up our loins and get going again."

House Minority Leader John J. Rhodes, who had called for the President's impeachment earlier this week, confessed to feelings of "sadness and deep regret. At the same time, I'm glad for the country in two ways.

"The matter is going to be over with and we have a completely capable man to take over. I'm optimistic about the future . . . I look for a healing time. There are those who would continue to harass President Nixon. I don't believe this group will be large in numbers. He will be allowed to go in peace. The country should then turn itself to constructive tasks."

Nevertheless, the trauma remained. Never in the history of the Republic has a President been driven from office.

Only eight times had a President failed to complete his term. Four were assassinated—Lincoln, Garfield, McKinley, Kennedy. Four died of disease—Harrison, Taylor, Harding, Franklin Roosevelt. But only Richard Nixon had resigned in the face of inevitable House impeachment and almost certain conviction by the Senate.

The day before his announcement, he had been warned by Republican congressional leaders that only 10 of the 435 House members were likely to oppose impeachment and that only 15 of 100 senators would vote to acquit him of "high crimes and misdemeanors"—obstruction of justice, the abuse of power and contempt of Congress.

He could have chosen to "tough it out," to "Stonewall it" and to take himself and the nation through the long ordeal of impeachment and trial. He could have raised the specter of crisis in a last effort to rally support.

In the end, he chose the other course. After the final blow had fallen on Monday with the release of the most damaging of his secretly-recorded conversations, he moved swiftly.

Rhodes said yesterday that the decision probably was sealed Sunday at Camp David. By Wednesday, when Rhodes met with Mr. Nixon at the White House, it was apparent that this presidency was at an end:

"The President knew that the situation was hopeless. He really behaved like a champion and made it easy on all of us. It was the President who said there were only 10 votes for him in the House. I didn't disagree with that although I actually thought there were more. Just before we left . . . the President said, 'Just make it plain that whatever decision I make will be completely in the national interest.'"

Until the end, his daughter, Julie, had urged him to stay on and make a fight in the Senate. So had a tiny band of congressmen, and one of them, Rep. Earl Landgrebe (R-Ind.), got one of the last of the presidential letters yesterday.

Landgrebe had said that the "liberals are lynching our President" and Mr. Nixon replied to him:

"I cannot predict whether your comments will go down in history but I want to assure you, they will remain forever in my heart and in the hearts of all the Nixons."

The manner of his departure was regarded everywhere as an affirmation

of the stability of the American system. The constitutional processes, it was said, had proved adequate. The Congress had risen to its mission. The country had reacted with understanding and maturity and Nixon himself had seemed serene and composed.

At the Wednesday meeting with Rhodes and Sens. Barry Goldwater and Hugh Scott, the President put his feet on the desk in the Oval Office and listened quietly to their grim assessment. All three, Scott said, told him the situation was "gloomy."

"He asked me," Scott said. "I said, 'Gloomy.' He said, 'Damn Gloomy?' I said, 'Yes, sir.'"

That set the stage for the final act.

By the morning, the government was taking it all in stride. Agriculture Secretary Earl Butz was able to joke in a speech to the American School Food Association.

Referring to the retiring president of the organization, he observed, "You are going to discover shortly that there is nothing pastier than a past president."

At the Treasury Department, Mary Brooks was sworn in for a second five-year term as director of the Mint. "This is a very unhappy day for many of us," she said. "But the past is prologue. The government hasn't stopped. It's going on . . ." Foreign governments were notified that a transfer of power was imminent.

In the Senate, Edward W. Brooke of Massachusetts, the first Republican to call for the President's resignation, introduced a "sense-of-the-Congress" resolution. It would have the effect of urging Watergate Special Prosecutor Leon Jaworski, who aggressively pressed the investigation against the President and his men, not to prosecute the President after he became a private citizen. It also would urge the same course for prosecutors at state and local levels.

Hubert H. Humphrey and George McGovern, both defeated for the presidency by Mr. Nixon, said they were considering joining Brooke as co-sponsors.

On television early in the morning, before an audience estimated at 60 million Americans, Rep. Peter W. Rodino Jr. of New Jersey spoke with emotion of his own feelings. Rodino, who had chaired the congressional hearing that led to the fateful vote committee votes for articles of impeachment and had himself cast three "Aye" votes, told of his "reverence for the presidency." He wept, he said, after those first articles were adopted.

As always in a crisis, Americans

were rallying around the presidency. It happened to Dwight D. Eisenhower at the time of the U-2 crisis, to John F. Kennedy at Bay of Pigs, to Lyndon B. Johnson at the Kennedy assassination. It seems certain to happen to the man who will become the 38th President of the United States, Gerald R. Ford of Michigan.

The same sense of calm acceptance was not as apparent elsewhere when the dramatic news instantly sped around the world. In Moscow, Tass tersely announced the resignation without comment. In Paris, the foreign minister, Jean-Pierre Fourcade, said the resignation might unleash speculative upheaval in the world money markets. In London, there were reports of a wave of international concerns and fears of unknown repercussions.

In this, alone, were expressed the ancient fears about the fall of kings being accompanied by cataclysmic actions.

The problems that will confront the new President were also evident throughout the day.

In the Midwest, where Richard Nixon always looked for the heart of his constituency, a searing drought continued. It held a warning that foreign countries may receive less American grain during the coming year, further fueling and already dangerous worldwide inflation.

In Washington, the government announced that wholesale prices had spurted to their highest point, led by increases in food and industrial costs and "continuing adjustments to energy problems."

On Wall Street, the stock market began the day with another round of heavy trading that has marked the uncertainty of the week. When the first rumors about the President's possible resignation sped through the nation, Wall Street rallied dramatically. In three days, the Dow Jones industrial average rose 45 points. But yesterday, after initial move upward, the market reacted more warily and then the average dropped six points as investors took their profits and awaited further developments.

The first reports of historic change came in mid-morning with bulletins from the White House quoting unnamed White House aides. Shortly after noon, Ronald Ziegler, his voice quavering, issued a one-minute statement to the press.

"I am aware of the interest of the American people and you in this room concerning developments today and over the last few days. This, of course, has been a difficult time.

"The President of the United States will meet various members of the bipartisan membership of Congress at the White House early this evening.

"Tonight, at 9 o'clock Eastern Daylight Time, the President of the United States will address the nation on radio and television from his Oval Office."

He had not mentioned the President's name.

There was an ironic note in the names of three television programs that had been scheduled—and immediately canceled—for that hour in Washington.

The programs were: "The Taste of Ashes," on NBC Channel 4; "The Nature of Evil," on ABC Channel 7, and "The Lost Man," on CBS Channel 9.

Unintentionally those names evoked the turmoil and passions that have surrounded Richard Nixon and the American people for the past two years. For month after month, year after year, the Watergate scandal spread like a poison through the body politic. For month after month, year after year, the President stubbornly fought off a host of investigators, public and private. Slowly, reluctantly, the nation began to conceive that the once-unthinkable ultimate act of impeachment might be employed—drawing the sword from the temple, as the young congressman, William S. Cohen of Maine, described it.

The sword was finally unsheathed. Less than two weeks ago, a committee of the Congress took its first roll call on impeachment in more than a century. It was only the second time such an action had been taken against a President.

A coalition of Democrats and Republicans, liberals and conservatives, men and women from all corners of the country voted nearly 3 to 1 against the President. That, coupled with the unanimous Supreme Court ruling compelling him to turn over still more of those destructive tape recordings, was a near-fatal blow.

But still the President continued his struggle, still he maintained he would not resign, still he said he would carry the case until the constitutional process had run its course.

Last Monday, Aug. 5, saw the final blow. He released three more transcripts. They contained the final seeds of his destruction. He conceded he had withheld critical evidence from his lawyer, his aides and staunchest supporters—and that he had personally approved plans for the Watergate cover-up over six days after the break-in on June 17, 1972.

All his previous public statements about his role were demolished by his own words.

The last week brought evidence of a President wrestling alone with his fates.

The White House logs told of his isolation and search for a solution:

Aug. 1 (Thursday) White House: Canceled meeting with economic advisers.

Aug. 2 (Friday) White House: No meetings.

Aug. 3 (Saturday) Left in afternoon for Camp David with Mrs. Nixon, daughters and sons-in-law, and Bebe Rebozo.

Aug. 4 (Sunday) Camp David: Called meeting with Alexander Haig, his chief of staff; Ziegler; Patrick Buchanan and Ray Price, speech writers and advisers; James St. Clair, his lawyer.

Aug. 5 (Monday) White House: Released statement on tapes. No meetings.

Aug. 6 (Tuesday) White House: Cabinet meeting 11 a.m., private meeting following with Henry Kissinger.

Aug. 7 (Wednesday) White House: Morning meetings with Haig, Ziegler, William Timmons; meeting with Rabbi Baruch Korff early afternoon; meeting with Rhodes, Goldwater and Scott, 5 p.m.

Out of those private sessions came the decision that will live in history.

The denouncement of Thursday evening, Aug. 8, came on a day of paramount significance to Richard Nixon. It was exactly six years ago to the day that he stood before the cheering Republican National Convention and accepted his party's call as its presidential nominee.

"America is in trouble today not because her people have failed," he said then to great applause, "but because her leaders have failed."

Richard Nixon already had come a long way by that August night in Miami Beach. For more than a generation he been a central figure on the American scene: congressman, senator, Vice President, defeated presidential candidate, and finally triumphant President.

But for all his battles, his defeats and victories, Richard Nixon always had wrestled with crises and had somehow survived. In those last tape recordings that finally brought him down this week, he was speaking of those crises again, drawing lessons from the past, seeking way out of his troubles.

But this time still the existential loner, he had met a crisis he could not overcome.