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Nixon is right to be silent; who wants a chatty executioner?

On the whole, it is sensible to take the side of Congress against the Executive, up until you come close to spilling over into the kind of chaos mercifully ended by Charles de Gaulle when he filled up the great cavities of the Fourth Republic. We are not near to that kind of anarchy in the United States, and it is therefore the operative presumption that the White House has entirely too much power.

That said, one makes the distinctions. The Congress of the United States has luxuriated in hypocrisy for a very long time. On the one hand it resents characteristic executive usurpation, on the other hand it a) does nothing about it; and b) is always there strengthening the hand of the executive. The typical bill passed nowadays by Congress gives the President the power to invoke or not to invoke this or that measure; gives him the responsibility for naming the members of this or the other board; passes sense-of-the-Congress resolutions while ignoring the simpler remedy of decreeing how things shall be. And of course in matters economic, it is particularly fond of passing lazy inflationary bills and expecting the President to veto them; or, if he fails to do so, contriving somehow to blame the President for the inflation that ensues.

The focus of congressional resentment, at this writing, is the recent bombing of North Vietnam, and the refusal of Mr. Rogers and Mr. Kissinger to appear before a Senate committee to "explain" the President's decision. All kinds of things are being deduced from the President's recent reclusiveness, but a few critical observations are usually left unmade, to wit:

1) A president who plays with the press as kittenishly as FDR or JFK, is

potentially more dangerous than the president who is aloof from the press. Better that the press should be presumptively skeptical of presidential operations, than that it should treat the president unctuously, in reaction to his charm or openhandedness.

2) What is it expected that Mr. Nixon could have said to the press to explain his decision to proceed with the bombing?

"Mr. President, do you really believe that the carpet bombing of North Vietnam is going to bring Hanoi to the negotiating table with further concessions?"

How would Mr. Nixon have answered that question responsibly?

If he had said that he did believe the bombing would work, he'd have strengthened North-Vietnamese resolution to resist the pressure of the bombing.

If he had said that he did not believe the bombing would work, he'd have raised the question why he had resorted to it.

If he had said that he did not know whether the bombing would work, he'd have said in effect that he was indulging a petulance. Since presidential petulance has the firepower of a dozen Hiroshima bombs, it isn't prudent to expect that the public will favor its indulgence.

3) But if he had looked calmly at his tormentors and said: Nemo me impune lacessit, and walked back into the Oval Room, why he'd have been arrested moments later as the murderer in cold blood of Tom Wicker and Anthony Lewis.

It is altogether obvious what Richard Nixon is up to. Those who disagree with his decision are perfectly free to do so. Why should he give them a more elaborated scaffold on which to hang him? He is right, at this moment, to be silent. Who wants a chatty executioner?