

Presidential Character

By Anthony Lewis

One of the most thoughtful political studies of recent years was "The Presidential Character," by James David Barber of Duke University. The book argued that the performance of Presidents related significantly to their character patterns.

Professor Barber saw President Nixon as what he termed an "active-negative," along with Woodrow Wilson and Lyndon Johnson. Such a type, he said, is ambitious, aggressive, hard-working almost to the point of compulsion. Yet he does not seem to enjoy the effort. Politics, like life, is pain to be endured. He sees himself at war with a hostile environment, and his resources of inner confidence for that struggle are slim. Compromise is difficult, because it erodes the ego, and so the frustrations of power pile up.

The Barber thesis is built on careful factual analysis. The Nixon chapters record the many examples in his public career of self-pity and fear of humiliation; the search for external relief; for public relations coups and scapegoats; the need for power and for crises that show what can be endured.

All this provides a useful framework for consideration of Nixon's press conference last week in San Clemente.

The strain of his situation there evoked sympathy even from those most critical of the President. But his words still have to be understood, and they showed the familiar prints of his personality.

There was the strong sense of a man beleaguered, facing a hostile press and others who would prefer that he failed. Others were to blame for much. White House conversations were taped "because my advisers felt it was important"; John Mitchell

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should have spoken; it was up to Judge Byrne to object if the job offer to him was wrong, and so on.

The concern with image was strikingly demonstrated. He said he would use "every day" of the next three and one-half years "trying to get the people of the United States to recognize" that in the end his Government "deserves high marks." Image, not substance. And there was the attempt at distraction in the unsupported claim that previous Administrations were "well known" to have committed burglaries "on a very large scale."

Professor Barber said in his book that rigidity was the great risk in

active-negative Presidents: "The frustrations of power pile up slowly but steadily, until the temptation to reassert one's integrity and manhood by some adamant stand becomes irresistible." He instanced Wilson's demand for Senate ratification of the League of Nations treaty without reservations, and on Johnson's escalation of the Vietnam war.

Writing in 1971, Barber said "the primary danger of the Nixon Presidency" lay in that possible rigidity. If "confronted with a severe threat to his power and sense of virtue," Barber said, Mr. Nixon might attempt some drastic action or become fixed on a failing policy, in a way as damaging to the country as the Wilson and Johnson episodes.

Watergate is that danger come to life. It is the worse because it has so far denied Mr. Nixon the escape mechanism that he has used in the past—surmounting one crisis by moving on to another.

The President has been desperately trying to use that technique in the Watergate crisis. In his television speech of April 30, again in the speech of Aug. 15, and again in the press conference of Aug. 22 he spoke of the need to move on to other things—"matters that cannot wait," he said Aug. 15, "the urgent business of our nation."

Such appeals will have some effect on a public to some extent weary of Watergate. But they are not likely to make the crisis disappear for good. There are simply too many time bombs ticking away: the lawsuit over the tapes, the probable further judgments, the trials, the troubles of Vice President Agnew, the Congressional investigations. It is all beyond control. It is going to go on and on.

Under endless pressures, what may Richard Nixon do? The particular danger to which the Barber thesis points is of some explosion designed to distract, perhaps a foreign adventure. Despite the President's specific denials, resignation cannot be excluded. At other difficult points in his political life he has spoken of giving it up. What seems hard to imagine is a spirit of candor and accommodation that would ease the political tensions.

In an article in *World* magazine last month Professor Barber looked for the larger lessons of Watergate. Do we need to change our Presidential system of government?, he asked. Or how else can we avoid such dangers in future?

Structural reform, he rightly said, is no panacea. You cannot really contain the American President in a neat organizational chart; you may bring him "to a roomful of knowledgeable people, but you can't make him think differently as a result."

No, our hope must lie ultimately in human beings, in the character of those we choose to be our President. We must have someone who looks not outside but inside for truth, someone with the confidence to have an open mind, someone who sees politics not as war but as persuasion.