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BAH EW SUN 5/11/73

Finding the Bottom of Nixon's 'Deplorable Incident'

NEW YORK.

PRESIDENT NIXON, who has never been noted for understatement, now describes the Watergate scandal as a "deplorable incident." This is the mildest use of the English language since somebody referred to the San Francisco earthquake as "an unfortunate occurrence," and it suggests that Nixon still hasn't identified the source or measured the magnitude of the tragedy.

The reorganization of his Cabinet and White House staff suggests the same thing. He has done what he had to do, but tardily and grudgingly. He has got rid of his losing cards, Haldeman, Ehrlichman, Dean, etc., which is all to the good, but he is still reshuffling the same old deck.

Back comes Connally, a good tough guy to have at your side in a brawl, but scarcely a symbol of objective truth: Big John is too smart and experienced in the ways of politics to tolerate a lot of zealous amateurs and burglars around the White House, but with all his guts and talents, he is still an insider with presidential ambitions, and scarcely a disinterested seeker after truth.

The "source" of this tragedy is that power has been exercised by the "insiders," who were more loyal to the President than to the law, or their oath of office under the Constitution. The remedy was

to bring in a few outsiders, who would serve the President faithfully, but be independent enough to tell him when they thought he was wrong. And what is probably more important in this crisis, that they should be recognized by the people to be independent.

President Nixon has not done this. He has improved the situation from a month ago. He has put Gen. Alexander Haig in Haldeman's job temporarily, and Connally in the White House as a consultant on domestic and foreign policy, which may help replace Ehrlichman and worry Kissinger, but while this changes things and may be better than before, it is still a reshuffle of insiders, a new defensive unit, and a new game plan, rather than a new philosophy.

This may not be fair—probably is not fair—to the old players, Richardson, Haig, Connally, Ruckelshaus, and the others who are shuffling from one job to another and leaving the government with new leaders who won't be able to understand their assignments or master their problems for many months. But the fact is that the White House and the Cabinet are now a shambles, while the President is pretending that the whole thing is merely a "deplorable incident."

This is the same sort of self-deception that got him into trouble in the first place.

He created the atmosphere of suspicion and secrecy in which all this dirty business flourished.

If it were clear that the President had finally understood the meaning of these scandals, it would be pointless and even cruel to keep harping on the mistakes of the past. But it is not at all clear, even at this late date, after all the disclosures, convictions, resignations, indictments of Mitchell and Stans, corruptions of the CIA and the State Department, that the President is prepared to get at what he calls "the bottom of this thing," or even that he understands what the bottom of this thing is.

The bottom of it is the corruption of power, and the attempt of a personally loyal staff to perpetuate the President's power, even if it has to break the law, defy the Congress, bend the Constitution, or ignore and vilify the press. Not consciously, of course, but carelessly and even self-righteously.

But he is still talking about a "deplorable incident," still acting as if this were merely a legal problem of catching burglars, who can now be left to Elliot Richardson, John Connally and the courts, while he goes on to the more important problem of "building a new structure of peace in the world."

Also, the men around him

are apparently still encouraging his self-delusion. Secretary of State Rogers is quoted as telling him at a Cabinet meeting: "I know that the American people are with you," and George Bush: "I want you to know that Republicans everywhere are strongly supporting you." And the President, at least in public, pretends to believe it.

"Let me say," he observed at a party fund-raising dinner the other night in Washington, "I don't stand here as a loser. We stand here tonight as winners, and we're going to win again."

Well, the chances are that nobody's going to win on this kind of self-deception. The President's only refuge now is the truth, and a new administration; not of insiders, but of disinterested men, who can tell the difference between a national crisis and a "deplorable incident."

New York Times News Service