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The Lure of Secrecy

President Nixon's speech to the former prisoners of war at the White House yesterday was an impassioned defense—not of telling the truth or of obeying the law or of dealing fairly with one's adversaries—but of secrecy.

Secrecy is at the center of the ever-widening Watergate scandals. This whole complicated series of crimes and conspiracies which has already led to the conviction of several individuals, the indictment of others, and the almost certain indictment of still others could not have occurred except in secrecy. Lives have been ruined, careers broken and reputations disgraced because men unwisely gave instructions and committed acts in darkest secrecy which they would not have dared to attempt in the open sunlight of public knowledge.

If there is any individual who should now understand the dangers of secrecy, it is President Nixon. Only three days ago, he had to issue a lengthy statement of explanation and apology for secret misdeeds committed in his name and in his interest. No other Chief Executive in the history of the Republic has ever had to say as Mr. Nixon said on Tuesday: "It is clear that unethical, as well as illegal, activities took place. . . . To the extent that I may in any way have contributed to the climate in which they took place, I did not intend to; to the extent that I failed to prevent them, I should have been more vigilant."

The characteristic feature of that climate in which unethical and illegal activities flourished was secrecy, an obsessive secrecy which is redolent of a police state and which has no place in this democracy. But like the Bourbons, Mr. Nixon seems to have forgotten nothing and learned nothing. A man who can exalt the value of secrecy after the ordeal of Watergate is a man willfully incapable of learning from experience.

Traditionally in Europe and increasingly in this country, citizens have permitted their governments to act secretly in foreign affairs. When President Nixon argues that without secret negotiations with North Vietnam, China and Russia he could not have made diplomatic gains, he is, in effect, saying that a self-governing democracy has to conform to the rules set by closed, totalitarian societies. It ill-becomes an American President to argue that he has to ape the style of dictators

who have contempt for their citizens.

"We have to stop making heroes out of those who steal secrets and publish them in newspapers," Mr. Nixon declared.

In putting the question of secrecy and security that way, Mr. Nixon demonstrated that he fails to understand the American principle and the American tradition that secrecy in government is something to be held to an absolute minimum, not something to be inflated into a way of life.

It was Thomas Jefferson who laid down the sound American principle: "Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a Government without newspapers or newspapers without a Government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter."

It was Woodrow Wilson who called for "open covenants openly arrived at."

It was the Founding Fathers who wrote the First Amendment making freedom of the press inviolate. They did not provide any constitutional sanction for executive secrecy or for dirty deeds masquerading as national security.

If Mr. Nixon's remarks are repugnant in principle, they are also untrue as a statement of fact. If it was not for a free press which exposed the facts about the war in Vietnam, the war might well be going on today and the guests at yesterday's banquet might still be in Hanoi prison camps. A free press has been one of the most powerful forces for peace in Vietnam as it has been one of the powerful forces in exposing the secret rottenness of Watergate.

The perils of secrecy far outweigh its advantages. Secrecy is a dangerous lure to be resisted rather than a virtue to be cherished. If the President of the United States is incapable of getting straight these fundamental truths, it is all the more important that the former prisoners of war and the rest of us ponder them in these difficult days for the United States of America.