

The Embattled Presidency

The plight of President Nixon is truly ghastly to contemplate. The long drawn out Watergate horror has obviously done the White House the most crippling damage. And somehow—although perhaps illogically—the charges against Vice President Agnew have now made it all much worse.

Yet it is a bit premature to conclude that the President has now been reduced to permanent political impotence. To begin with, a lot is going to depend on what the congressmen and senators hear from their constituents during the recess.

The Agnew problem may change the picture. But there were pre-Agnew signs the country was beginning to be a bit fed up with the new national sport of whack-the-President. This was really why the Senate Watergate Committee has now recessed, and has further voted to put strict limits on its public hearings after the Senate reconvenes.

Sen. Herman Talmadge of Georgia was the prime mover behind both decisions. He was bitterly opposed by the committee staff. He could not have won a narrow majority, moreover, without a violent and alarming change in the mail being received by his more aggressive colleagues of the Watergate committee. From being heroes, they found themselves being called villains for carrying whack-the-President too far.

The present Congress has the approximate backbone of a dead lamprey. Hence the folks back home have only to grumble a bit. The splendid senatorial shows of moral indignation will then come to an abrupt end. The real question is whether the folks back home will indeed grumble, or whether the recent Watergate mail has been misleading.

There is no question, meanwhile, that the character and tendency of the Congress is a potential asset for the President. It is downright hard to understand the fecklessness currently being displayed on Capitol Hill, particularly in the Senate, and particularly in the areas of foreign affairs and defense.

These are areas where the chickens always come home to roost in the end. Yet it does not seem to have occurred to more than a few senators that this country has had the worst kind of trouble on both occasions after the Second World War, when we seriously weakened our national defense. One lesson like the Korean war should have been enough, one might think. But in many respects, we are now in worse disarray than we were in 1950—

and the Congress will properly get the blame for any bad result.

Other chickens might be mentioned that are also likely to come home to roost, all of them looking like vultures. What matters here, however, is primarily that the Congress has given the President an area where he can counter-attack. Given Richard M. Nixon's character and situation, a vigorous counter-attack must surely be expected when the right time comes.

The object of the counter-attack, of course, must be regaining some of the presidency's lost authority, and some of the usual power to lead that all American presidents normally have. But before it will be possible to turn the game from whack-the-President into a game of whack-the-Congress, something is going to have to be done about Watergate's effects on the President personally.

The President is preparing to try to do precisely this, in the deepest seclusion this solitary man has ever chosen for himself. He could not get a real hearing from the country while the Watergate committee held the center of the stage. So far, indeed, has the presidency fallen. He will make his try

soon, however. And he will surely get a hearing now, whether for good or ill.

The foregoing is an attempted list of the assets the President can count upon, in order to restore his own position, at any rate in part. It is a pitifully short list—which is its main lesson. It is so short a list, too, and the assets are so slender, by the direct doing of the former regime in the Nixon White House. Whoever has been lying and how much, can be endlessly argued. But it cannot be argued that the former regime in the White House was a mere accident or happenstance.

So a great many people would like to see President Nixon permanently reduced to impotence, holding this is no more than he has deserved. There is only one trouble with this view—and it is not a moral trouble. Even in better days, the Congress was always utterly incapable of leading the country. Thus a United States with an impotent President inevitably resembles a beached whale. Beached whales do not last long, either.

So one must hope for some degree of recovery by a severely chastened President.

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