

The President's Isolation

How was it possible that a President, rightly lauded for his notable achievements in foreign affairs and facing no possibility of defeat in the 1972 election, allowed his administration to become involved in the Watergate scandal?

This is the question most frequently asked of me by people who know of my long acquaintance and friendship with President Nixon. Quite frankly, there is no simple answer, but a few observations may be in order.

Basically, Mr. Nixon is and always has been a loner. That is to say that while he has a few close and intimate friends who never trouble him with problems, he is not known for relaxed and warm relationships with members of Congress or even with many of the public figures who have served him so loyally.

One exception is Secretary of State William P. Rogers, who counselled the President so ably during several of his "Six Crises," and notably at the time of President Eisenhower's grave illness when Mr. Nixon was vice president.

Few leaders of the Republican Party, including Nelson Rockefeller, Barry Goldwater, Vice President Ag-

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new, prominent governors or U.S. senators can claim that they really know Richard M. Nixon.

True, they have worked together as politicians and Mr. Nixon, while out of office, vigorously campaigned for all of them. But these events were transitory; and in the campaign of 1972 many faithful Republicans were all but ignored in their bids for election or reelection.

Richard M. Nixon has become more and more isolated in the White House, or at his retreats at Key Biscayne and San Clemente. The President seldom seeks advice other than in the field of foreign affairs, where the brilliant Dr. Kissinger commands his respect and attention.

In domestic matters, the President has listened to a host of economic advisers—first as a believer in fiscal and monetary orthodoxy, and later as a self-described Keynesian.

But it was the President who made the final decisions in the seclusion of Camp David where Mr. Nixon says he can do his best thinking. The result has been a series of misadventures, especially with wage and price controls which have scuttled his hopes for bringing inflation to an acceptable rate of control.

It is the President, virtually alone, who insists upon prolonging the bombing in Cambodia. His rationale is that a show of force is required, or else a viable government in Cambodia can never be constituted. The fact is that Cambodia, badly governed by the Lon Nols and corrupt followers, cannot achieve the stability which is so desperately needed. Yet the President persists in this vain effort even as the Congress mainly disapproves.

Another factor which imperils Mr. Nixon's presidency is his unwillingness to hear "the bad news." When John Connally attempted to give it to the President "with the bark off," Mr. Nixon was displeased. Mr. Connally has now only a tenuous association with the White House, since he suddenly found himself with virtually nothing to do.

This cavalier treatment of men who have acted sincerely in what they considered to be the President's best interest has turned off much of the useful advisory input which Mr. Nixon was not getting from his staff.

Unlike the administrations of Harry Truman and Lyndon Johnson, the Congress has been all but ignored by the White House. Mr. Nixon would have been well advised to maintain his congressional contacts. A few social hours of casual conversation with the leaders of Congress might have prevented many misunderstandings.

It is simply not President Nixon's way to let his guard down, even with the important men in Congress who can either support or torpedo his programs. They see him only when they are summoned to the White House. Yet he can find time to congratulate a football coach, or praise a Frank Sinatra on his testimony before the Senate Crime Committee.

I do not begrudge the hours of relaxation which the President enjoys with the Bebe Rebozos and the Bob Abplanals. Every President is entitled to a few friends who seek nothing but the association and make no intellectual contribution to matters of larger import.

But Sen. William B. Saxbe of Ohio, an influential force, has told me the President is so isolated that obtaining an appointment with him is virtually an impossibility. And the Vice President, happily for him, is so far removed from the inner circle that he didn't know anything about Watergate other than what he read in the newspapers.

President Nixon's mistake, as I see it, was in surrounding himself with a coterie of tough but dedicated men such as the Haldemans, Ehrlichmans and Mitchells who were unable, as the New York Times has said, "to distinguish between ethics and success."

They, in turn, recruited the attractive, bright young men who have been

appearing before Sen. Sam Ervin's investigative committee. "The consistency in the pattern of giving them high prestige posts," says the Times, "suggests strongly that the younger men were type-cast for their roles precisely because they could be expected to follow any line in return for the high excitement of apparent power now and the promise of real power later."

Meanwhile, the President's old and trusted friends, such as Herbert G. Klein, who had been aligned with Mr. Nixon's political fortunes ever since 1946, were eventually shunted aside by the Haldeman-Ehrlichman-Ron Ziegler combination. Robert H. Finch, former Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare, is another faithful Nixonite who was pushed around and isolated.

Herb Klein, originally selected by Nixon as director of communications, found his authority and responsibilities eroded by the palace guard but thought he could survive because of his long friendship with the President. Good old Herb, a decent and loyal man who never bothered to build a personal power base, was wrong. He has returned to Los Angeles as vice president of Metromedia.

The present plight of President Nixon is an American tragedy such as we have not witnessed in our times. For here was a President almost universally acclaimed for the building of bridges with Russia and China in the cause of peace who has now been toppled from the pedestal of public esteem.

I shall make no attempt here to pre-judge the guilt or innocence of the President in the Watergate affair. But there is no escaping the fact that his image has been sadly tarnished. This raises serious questions as to how effectively the President can govern the country in the future.

It is sickening to see the parade of Mr. Nixon's bright young men before the Ervin committee—slick, well-mannered, extolling their ideals—and all attempting to rationalize their illegal acts while ascribing much of the blame to others.

Whatever led to such deplorable levels of conduct within the White House with its list of administration "enemies" and a contemptible disregard for public morality? I can think of no better explanation than Lord Acton's observation that "Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely."

Ultimately, President Nixon will be forced to go before the country and give the people the truth. He alone must attempt to restore, if he can, the people's faith in their government.

It is the President's duty to explain how such a senseless, stupid and unnecessary tragedy was thrust upon the American people.