

Alfred Friendly

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Watergate: Rhetoric vs. Responsibility

President Nixon has assured us in almost every public statement since the unhappy event that although he is blameless for any of the Watergate sins, he nevertheless assumes responsibility for them. That is surely the manly, not to say noble, thing to do, and in the best moral tradition. It touches the fine feelings of all of us who honor the forthright acknowledgment of the varsity captain after a losing game. What is more conducive to our forgiveness than the humble bow of the leader who has been traduced?

But nagging questions remain: Just how does Mr. Nixon discharge the responsibility he has so selflessly and sturdily assumed? Does he pay the fines of the corporations which illegally contributed to his campaign? Is he going to serve the jail sentences of those "overzealous" subordinates—for whom he says he is responsible—who, in an excess of loyalty, had momentary memory lapses about what the law was? Does the idea cross his mind that the head of an organization the summary of whose offenses against the law filled six frugally written columns in *The Washington Post* the other day might shoulder just enough responsibility to get the hell out?

Certainly not. After all, whatever unfortunate things were done were, in his words, just "mistakes." As far as I am able to research the matter, the characterization of them as crimes or felonies has never crossed his lips.

And his two first lieutenants, who presumably presided over the organization if he himself did not, remain in his mind the finest public servants he has ever known (But, if so, was it not sinful of him and a disservice to the public, to let them resign?).

No, it is sufficient for Mr. Nixon simply to say he bears the responsibility. Nothing much else is needed. It is given to us to have salvation by incantation, to achieve the state of grace by rhetoric. It is enough to utter the routine words that render deeds a super-

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fluity. To be sure, the weight of earlier theological thinking is to the contrary, but no matter: We now live in the Age of Billy Graham, when mouthing substitutes for doing.

But does anyone really believe that the President, if himself guiltless of any of the several dozen episodes that go under the rubric of Watergate, has in fact accepted any responsibility whatever in any operative sense of the word? There has not been one word from him of culpability for gathering about him the set of men who made the over-zealous mistakes, men whom, as someone has said before me, it would be flattery to term mediocre.

It can be argued that all Presidents

have done exactly as Mr. Nixon, professing to accept accountability for errors made by men of their administrations but themselves undergoing no penalty. But that is not quite true. Many Presidents have pleaded guilty when they were, confessing their own role in mal-, mis- or non-feasance, and bearing some part of the penalty (Not FDR: the only mistake he ever admitted having made was moving Thanksgiving to the third Thursday in November one year at the behest of retail merchants. But transparent cynicism is less offensive than sanctimoniousness).

The Bay of Pigs is a case in point. Kennedy took the blame on his own shoulders for a piece of tragically bad judgment by him and faced up to the personal humiliation, including having to authorize ransom for the captives. The evidence is overwhelming that when he said the fault had been his he meant it and felt it, and the people realized that he did. In short, he came clean. Mr. Nixon has not, and it would seem that the people realize that too.

One can sympathize with the plaint made by E. Howard Hunt, high school-primitive though it was. He thought he had orders from above and was entitled to expect that the man who now says he accepts responsibility for Watergate would also be subject to retribution. But Mr. Nixon is in the White House (when not elsewhere) and the fellow in the pokey is Mr. Hunt.