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A City Of Actors, Waiting

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If you have been out of Washington for a month, as this reporter has been, it's easier to understand why Henry Kissinger found his re-entry problems so unsettling. Only when you have been away for that long a time do you feel the full effect of the poisonous climate of paralysis and posturing that has developed here.

The root problem is unchanged. It is the famous "cancer on the presidency" of which John Dean warned 15 months ago. The man in the White House is at the center of Washington's life, and when his authority is being eroded by the acid of distrust, the whole foundation totters.

The deterioration in the President's position over the past few weeks has been dramatic. I left town about the time the White House transcripts were published and came back to the disclosure that the President had been cited as an unindicted co-conspirator in the Watergate coverup.

The now-familiar presidential cycle of defiance, defeat, and reluctant disclosure has moved back to the defiance stage again, and Mr. Nixon is in confrontation with the Special Prosecutor, the House Judiciary Committee and the courts. He will, inevitably, be forced to retreat again, but the court case is fraught with special peril to him, for defiance of the Supreme Court is, even in the eyes of House Minority Leader John J. Rhodes, "the one thing the President probably could not survive."

Add to this the fact that Charles Colson, the ultimate hard-line insider, has broken, and that the Kissinger flank is weakening, and the long-postponed moment of truth would seem to be close at hand.

But the returning reporter quickly learns that Washington has been plunged into doubt about the capacity of Congress or the courts to summon the will to act. Two years after the Watergate break-in cracked the secrecy surrounding the malefactions of this administration, the capital seems paralyzed and unable to purge itself of the evil in its blood.

The impression of paralysis may not be rooted in reality, but there is no mystery as to why it prevails. The same corrosive process of suspicion-breeding secrecy that led to Watergate

itself has infected those investigating the case.

Special Prosecutor Leon Jaworski may be moving inexorably to lay bare the whole story, but his pattern of private plea-bargaining arrangements with major and minor culprits has sown doubts about the standards of justice being applied.

The Judiciary Committee may be on the track toward a summer impeachment vote, but the closed-door sessions and the selective leaks of testimony have spurred a spate of rumors about foot-dragging and indecision in its ranks.

Washington is full of people poised to act—but not acting. Like runners

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left too long in the starting blocks, they lose their balance and sprawl awkwardly, complaining of the fates.

No one seems able to move. The House, mesmerized by the impeachment impasse, has become a death-trap of legislation. As The Washington Post's Mary Russell has pointed out, long-nurtured measures for campaign finance reform, committee reorganization, simplified voter registration and land use regulations are being sidetracked or killed by legislators fearful of the future, imprisoned by the past.

Given that atmosphere, it is no wonder that the Judiciary Committee hesitates to ask the House to cite the President for contempt, even though his refusal to produce evidence for the impeachment proceeding is as clear a case of contempt as one could imagine.

What could liberate Washington from its paralysis—from the feeling that the gears have locked—is a single public act, sweeping away the equivocations, and expressing the moral judgment that must be made on this too-long-protracted tragedy.

But until that comes, Washington will suffer.

On a more personal note, during the time I was away we lost two of the finest journalists of this generation, Stewart Alsop and Bruce Blossat. I was not privileged to know Mr. Alsop well personally, but his columns were probably the best being produced in this city—cool drinks of reasonableness in an overheated climate.

Bruce Blossat was a friend as well as a guide—a man who loved politics, loved people and loved the profession of journalism so thoroughly and so unflaggingly that he could make the dreariest assignment an occasion of delight for those who shared it with him.

They will be missed by all of us—especially in a time like this.