

In "The Twilight of the Presidency," George Reedy, former press secretary to the late President Johnson, wrote: "The White House is a court. . . . This raises the greatest of all barriers to Presidential access to reality and raises a problem which will plague the White House so long as the President is a reigning monarch rather than an elected administrator." No nation of free men, Mr. Reedy warned, should permit itself to be governed "from a hallowed shrine where the meanest lust for power can be sanctified."

The trend toward a royal—or imperial—White House began long before President Nixon moved in. Problems of war and security have cut the President off from the people, leaving him to a large extent at the mercy of courtiers and sycophants. President Truman's morning walks were one of the last visible gestures against royal seclusion. Since President Kennedy the imperial "we" has increasingly become part of Presidential language.

President Nixon has given the new regal Presidency the sanction of deliberate policy: rule by surprise edict; substitution of a Presidential household guard's powers for those of the regular departments and the Cabinet; retreat from public view except for ceremonial occasions; symbolic handshakes with a selected populace, and state visits abroad. Even the proliferation of residences—the Western and the Florida White Houses, not to mention Camp David—bring to mind the numerous abodes of any self-respecting royal family. That parallel has not been lessened by the unilluminating explanation offered yesterday of the aid a rich friend provided to relieve Mr. Nixon of mundane financial concerns in acquiring San Clemente.

The outer trappings are important only because they create the atmosphere that invites abuse of power. The visible grandeur becomes pernicious because it causes pomp and power to be lodged in the same office. Other nations, such as Britain, grasping the danger, have deliberately separated royalty from all exercise of accountable governmental power.

* * *

Isolated rule is undesirable even under good rulers. It becomes a menace when secluded courtiers and privileged executives are authoritarian-minded pragmatists. Long before Watergate, the end of that perilous line was reached when Mr. Nixon's courtiers in the Justice Department demanded the power to tap telephones as the President's "inherent" right. Such arrogance should have left no doubt that these men would use the instruments of power in any way they thought the President wanted them to be used.

It was in the characteristic fashion of absolute rule that the courtiers unscrupulously employed and sullied the state's arsenal of power—the F.B.I., the C.I.A. and the military, in addition to their own White House credentials — to do what they thought was in their master's interest.

Nor should it be overlooked that Mr. Nixon gave these men unmistakable signals concerning the way he intended power to be wielded. He showed open contempt for Congress, even ignoring its legislative mandate. He demeaned the Supreme Court. He termed "soft-headed" those judges who disagreed with his ideology. He spoke patronizingly of the American people as "children." He fired advisers who dared to question his views.

In such an atmosphere, it is not surprising that those who served the President saw themselves not as civil servants but as their master's surrogates. As such, they dealt generously with favored industrialists, labor leaders and politicians; and there were some who spied on and intimidated those out of favor or out of line. When the ruler needed applause, they provided it, even if it meant forging the fan mail.

Democracy can neither tolerate nor survive such a monarchy in republican clothing. "A strong President," warned the late Prof. Clinton Rossiter, a noted conservative, "is a bad President, a curse upon the land, unless his means are constitutional and his ends democratic."

This is why it would be fatally wrong to shield the Presidency in its present shape. The essential task today is not to replace the fallen courtiers but to dismantle the concentrated form of Presidential rule that has become a threat to constitutional government.