NYTimes 15 Dec 70

DEC 15 1970
THE NEW YORK TIMES, T

Mr. Nixon's Moral Tone

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IN THE NATION

WASHINGTON, Dec. 14—"Moral authority in a great and diverse nation such as ours does not reside in the Presidency alone," President Nixon wrote to Chairman William W. Scranton of his Commission on Campus Unrest. Mr. Nixon was right, of course, but the commission had not claimed otherwise; rather it had made the subtly but vitally different suggestion that "only the President can offer the compassionate, reconciling moral leadership that can bring the country together again."

Unless moral "authority" and moral "leadership" are precisely the same thing, the "clergy, teachers, public officials, scholars, writers" cited by Mr. Nixon are scarcely in a position to offer the nation the kind of constructive personal example and symbolic attitude that a President can provide.

Put another way, moral authority is certainly not the President's alone, but moral leadership is—or should be—his to a greater degree than anyone else can claim—particularly since he has not hesitated to assert that he is the most powerful man in the world and, even in the letter to Mr. Scranton, pointed out that no one "has veto powers over a President's decision to do what he believes is right in the nation's interest."

Before headlines about the remarkable Connally appointment blank out the memory, in this swift and oblivious world, of Mr. Nixon's press conference of Dec. 10, it ought to be noted that two of his statements raised the question of moral leadership in unfortunate fashion. The first came when the President was asked if he approved of accusations by J. Edgar Hoover about an alleged kidnap-bombing plot and that the late Martin Luther King was "a liar."

Mr. Nixon chose to answer with praise for Mr. Hoover's "very great service to this country," and with a lawyer's refusal to discuss "specific actions" that the Justice Department was looking into. This might be all right for the kidnap-bombing case, although it begs the question why if the President won't comment on it Mr. Hoover should be entitled to do so.

But it was deeply offensive to millions of Americans, no doubt many more of them white than black, that the President of the United States should not have made so much as the tiniest gesture or offered the least word in defense of one of the great Americans of our time, a man honored worldwide, revered by his people, and murdered while working in their cause. It was the reverse of moral leadership to ignore that service while praising the man who had denigrated it.

Later in the same news conference, Mr. Nixon was asked about proposals that the Federal Government should "use its leverage to promote racial integration in suburban housing." After pointing out some instances where the law left him no choice, Mr. Nixon declared:

"I can assure that it is not the policy of this Government to use the power of the Federal Government or Federal funds in any other way, in ways not required by the law, for forced integration of the suburbs. I believe that forced integration in the suburbs is not in the national interest."

Aside from the fact that "promoting" integration and "forcing" integration are — again — subtly but vitally different matters, this declaration of Presidential policy abdicates moral leadership. This is not so much because of the substantive question involved; using the considerable power of the Federal Government even to promote integration of the suburbs, let alone forcing it, would be a complex and possibly dangerous matter that ought not to be entered upon lightly.

It was rather that Mr. Nixon did not trouble to point out this complexity, and the reasons for it; he did not think to say anything encouraging or educational about the desirability of ending discrimination and breaking down segregated housing patterns; and he did not bother to suggest any constructive alternatives to "forced integration," even of the mildest nature.

Moral leadership did not require Mr. Nixon to support "forced integration"; it did require that he recognize that millions of black Americans — and some who are not black—are victims of housing discrimination, and that he hold out to them some understanding of their plight, some hope for relief.

Earlier in his news conference, he had said that "divisions in this country are never going to end... the problem is trying to mute those differences, to mitigate them to the greatest extent possible and to develop a dialogue." That is exactly what the Scranton commission pleaded for, and precisely what Mr. Nixon seems not to understand how to do.