

WR Post

The Watergate Disaster (Cont'd)

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In New York the other day, Henry Kissinger—himself untouched by the Watergate accusations—spoke of the “tragedy” that had befallen certain of his colleagues, and he went on to say: “Without prejudging anyone’s guilt, one should ask for compassion for these people.” One should indeed. And one should also grant it. For compassion for the fallen—those in trouble and those in disgrace—is the distinguishing mark of a civilized society. We wish it weren’t so apt to point out that it is also a characteristic sadly and notoriously lacking in the Nixon administration’s approach to less well-placed wrongdoers who have had neither the advantages nor the rewards of those men now caught in the tightening web of the Watergate investigations. But one failure of response does not mandate another. Compassion—the capacity to be humbled and touched by the misfortune of another—transcends all questions of guilt and blame and class and race and politics and the rest. It is a kind of no-fault emotion. Let us stipulate as much.

Compassion for wrongdoers, however, is not the same thing as setting aside assignment of blame for their acts or failing to face up to the consequences of what they have done. And that is a point we would insist on. For the idea has been gaining currency that somehow the authority and prestige of the presidency, abroad as well as at home, can only be salvaged by separating out the Watergate scandal, socking it to the guilty and getting on with the nation’s legitimate business as quickly as possible. Otherwise, the thinking goes, we will be creating a situation in which the authority of the American presidency will have been severely damaged.

There is something seductive about this reasoning. But it really won’t do—not if we are to restore the basis of the President’s capacity to lead in an authentic way. An anecdote is worth recalling here. It has to do with the Justice Department’s failure to get rid of a U.S. Attorney whose Departmental superiors had found him guilty of “highly improper” activities in the field having to do with his own personal interests, but who had not been dismissed or even publicly called to account. The story came up during Attorney General Kleindienst’s confirmation hearings last year, and the explanation offered for the Department of Justice’s failure to act seems to us both relevant and instructive: it was that any action taken against this U.S. Attorney—any step which would have called his improprieties to public attention—would have shaken the people’s faith in their government, would have undermined their belief in law enforcement. Some thing not dissimilar seems to be at work in the understandable, if misguided, desire of many people just now to spare not just the President but the public the agony of contemplating the magnitude and meaning of what has been done. That way, we would argue, lies comfort—but

no solution to the crisis of authority that is upon us. It is a quarantine without a cure.

Presidential authority does not rest in whether people do or do not talk about a presidential scandal or on the degree to which their attention can be diverted to other more edifying things. It rests on public confidence that the leaders chosen to direct the nation’s affairs are acting fairly, responsibly, wisely and in accord with the people’s will as expressed through their duly constituted organs of government. If we should be able to perceive any single large pattern in the hurricane of shattered reputations and broken images that has been coming our way over the past 10 days, it is that the men around Mr. Nixon—the men he put in some of the most important and powerful offices of the land—behaved in a way that was contemptuous of the public and its will and contemptuous of the system of laws created to make that will reality. In their “loyalty” to Mr. Nixon, they were in fact disloyal to him or disloyal, anyway, to the office of the presidency.

Clearly, these men had no feeling for the institutions of American government or for the self-imposed limitations of politics or even for the ideas—law and order, first among them—that they and their constituents publicly espoused. They were tricksters unwilling to take their chances with the American system, ever planning some deceptive new maneuver, ever willing to believe a public mandate could be hoked up or bought or compelled—but ever unwilling to try legitimately to earn one. They counseled and practiced the politics of fright. And what they were frightened of—astonishingly—was the judgement of the people.

If you believe, as we do, that this fright was insulting and misplaced, and if you also believe that the prestige and credibility of the presidency must be restored, then it is a short step to the conclusion that the only way Richard Nixon can restore what is essential to the nation and to himself is by trusting the American people with all the facts. Mr. Nixon is in a terrible predicament at the moment, and nothing that affects him fails to affect the rest of us. We believe the situation can be redeemed. But we also believe that it can be redeemed only by his bending his every effort to win that popular trust which is essential to the functioning of the presidency, and that the only way in which he can win such trust is by pursuing and revealing the whole truth. The truth, in this case, involves much more than a real life account of which aide or official was doing which criminal thing when. It involves facing up squarely to the implications of what was done, to the full awful meaning of the course his closest advisers were permitted to pursue. Nobody in his right mind could say it will be easy. But letting the whole truth come out has one overriding advantage: It represents the only hope he has of regaining public trust and, with it, presidential authority.