

The Decay Of Decency

By James Reston

WASHINGTON, April 26—The capital is still buzzing with rumors about who is to blame for the Watergate fiasco, and who will take over after the inevitable house-cleaning; but the main question still is not *who* was to blame but *what* was to blame.

"The ordinary politician," Walter Lippmann wrote long ago, "has a very low estimate of human nature. In his daily life he comes into contact chiefly with persons who want to get something or avoid something.

"Beyond this circle of seekers after privileges, individuals and organized minorities, he is aware of a large, unorganized, indifferent mass of citizens who ask nothing in particular and rarely complain.

"The politician comes after a while to think that the art of politics is to satisfy the seekers after favors and to mollify the inchoate mass with noble sentiments and patriotic phrases. In easy times the politician is probably about right. . . .

"But in really hard times, the rules of the game are altered. The inchoate mass begins to stir. It becomes potent and when it strikes, it strikes with incredible emphasis. . . ."

This is not a bad description of how President Nixon drifted into this mess, and what is happening. There is very little trust in the Nixon Administration now because the President trusted few men, and some of those few let him down. He took the people and the institutions of the Congress for granted, concentrated on raising funds and devising schemes for his own reelection with the help of the "seekers

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after privilege" and in the end, the intrigues and machinations of little men entangled him and the Presidency in the present crisis.

The decay of decency has been apparent here for a long time. Mr. Nixon did not invent the corruption of the age, but he has been contemptuous of dissent, arrogant with the Congress, certain in his own mind that he was right, and confident that he and his isolated staff could dominate the affairs of the nation.

The explanation of all these dirty political tricks is said to be that he was violently opposed by a coalition of antiwar forces, some of whom had vowed to oppose his policies by violence if necessary. There was, of course, something to this.

His predecessor had been driven out of office largely by the anti-Vietnam demonstrators. Efforts had been made to disrupt the normal functions of the Federal Government, even to shut it down.

But the irony of this was that by the time the Watergate conspiracy was put together, the steam had already gone out of the militants, the country had turned against the demonstrators, and the Democratic party was in disarray.

Nevertheless, this mood of suspicion remained and was nourished by a staff that felt it could justify almost any means to serve what it regarded as the President's noble ends and assure his re-election against the threat of Senator McGovern's "radical" programs.

So, at least, goes the Republican alibi. It rests on the assumption that the success of the President was equivalent to the prosperity and even the security of the Republic, and if this required raising illegal campaign funds, or dishing out half-truths, ambiguities, hokum or misleading slogans, or even waging war without constitutional explanation—well, it was all in a good cause.

Even now, what troubles many of the men close to the President is not that they were wrong but that they were caught. There is still the bitterest resentment in the Administration about the daily disclosures of malfeasance and misfeasance, and as yet no suggestion from the top about how to correct what went wrong.

When the Vice President of the United States feels obliged to make a public statement that he has "full confidence in the integrity of the President of the United States," it is obvious that something very sad has happened in American political life.

A few years ago, this would have been inconceivable. What would have happened during President Eisenhower's crisis with Joe McCarthy if Vice President Nixon had called in the television cameras to proclaim that he had confidence in the President's "integrity"? Ike would probably have tossed him over the Washington Monument.

Maybe this explains the decay of decency. When you try to get to the root of *what* went wrong here, you come back inevitably to a kind of moral blindness in the actions of the men who planned and condoned the Watergate, and encouraged or tolerated the secretive and poisonous atmosphere in which it flourished.

This will not be corrected merely by getting rid of the little men who have been dealing with the big issues of the time. The President will have to revive an atmosphere in which men can assume "integrity" instead of having it endorsed for them by the Vice President.