

By Russell Baker

WASHINGTON, April 27 — Last week when the Watergate thing began getting very bad indeed for President Nixon, establishment thinkers of both parties began taking the line that we should all be cautious about leaning too hard on the President lest we end up by damaging the Presidency.

Some suggested that everyone who truly cares about the future of the Republic ought to rise above party on this one and join hands to see Mr. Nixon safely through the storm, for the sake of saving the Presidency.

Our Presidency—right or wrong!

A strange argument. If any benefit's to flow from the Watergate business, it might be the gaudy evidence that the Presidency is in bad shape and urgently needs to be reformed. To ignore this one positive aspect of the thing would be a sad loss of opportunity.

This is precisely the time for establishment men to lean on the thing with all their weight instead of urging us all to rush sandbags to the levee. The Presidency, after all, is not the country. It is not even the Government, but only a third of it. And even if it were the whole, why ought we accord it such awe as the devout give the divine?

Comparable reverence for the Congress would be looked upon by sensible men as evidence of imbecility. As for the judiciary, wise understanding begins with the axiom that while justice may be blind, judges are either Democrats or Republicans.

OBSERVER

The weaknesses of the Presidency have been accumulating since Franklin Roosevelt. It has become monarchical, arrogant, overblown with power and remote from the people.

These vices were at the heart of Watergate. The Royal Court's thirst for intrigue and intelligence inspired it. The limitless power of the Presidency to grant boons, or withhold, persuaded the bankrollers to finance it. Men, who had never run for public office, and had contempt for other men who had, organized it. And when it was exposed and should have been acknowledged, arrogance and power were used to conceal it, and made the final exposure more scandalous.

It is not an attractive office. All that power; all those technicians, executives, professors, lawyers, cops. The constant danger of lunatic assault to which so much power encapsulated in a single human body is inevitably vulnerable. The man outside the door with the box that blows up the world. All that firepower in the limousines that accompany the President to church.

Sealed off behind his metal fence, inside his guarded house, tucked away in his private office where even Senators may find it impossible to pass the hired Cerberus guarding the door, the President finds it hard to hear the country, the other men it has elected, the hurly-burly of the streets.

Everything about the office works to persuade him of his own unnatural

grandeur. This must create in the poor human man who enters this capsule a fearful suspicion that it would endanger all mankind if, in some test of the moment, he were exposed to the world as human. Not Olympian Zeus at all, but only the Wizard of Oz.

We look to them all as Olympian Zeuses now. The establishment men who urge us not to damage the Presidency are encouraging the view. In a time of few gods, let us not do away with one who has the power to hurl the ultimate thunderbolt.

All this is terribly unhealthy. Even Napoleon had Fouché and Talleyrand to move outside in the great world and keep him in touch. Presidents have only courtiers to keep out what they would rather not have Presidents hear.

As the Presidency becomes more grotesque and overbearing, it begins to destroy our President. John Kennedy was killed by it. The same institutional vices which created Watergate for Richard Nixon while he was occupied with foreign policy destroyed Lyndon Johnson in Vietnam while he was occupied with domestic policy.

Watergate shows us again the need for change. We have had repeated evidence over a dozen years that reform is overdue, that we must restore the human dimension to this potentially most graceful of political ideas, that we must somehow dispel the iron fences and firepower and brilliant tough-minded hard noses which seal the man off like priests around Pharaoh, and make it possible once again for him to be merely the first citizen of the Republic.