

Broken Confidence

The Watergate scandal has become a crisis of Presidential authority. In his address to the nation Monday evening, President Nixon tried but failed to resolve that crisis. The whole trend of future events remains in doubt.

Although he has dismissed three of his senior aides and formally accepted responsibility for whatever misdeeds may have been committed without his knowledge, Mr. Nixon basically has conceded nothing except what events have wrenched from him. In making those minimum moves, he has at the same time played down the seriousness of the scandals and tried to blur responsibility for them.

He praised H. R. Haldeman and John D. Ehrlichman, who resigned under pressure, as "two of the finest public servants it has been my privilege to know," adding: "I greatly regret their departure."

The President then offered this appalling excuse: "I know that it can be very easy under the intensive pressures of a campaign for even well-intentioned people to fall into shady tactics, to rationalize this on the grounds that what is at stake is of such importance to the nation that the end justifies the means. And both of our great parties have been guilty of such tactics."

But these excuses and words of praise come after Mr. Ehrlichman had already told the Federal Bureau of Investigation that it was he who assigned two of the men later convicted in the Watergate trial to investigate Daniel Ellsberg. When he learned that they had burglarized the files of Mr. Ellsberg's psychiatrist, Mr. Ehrlichman, although he is a member of the bar, took no action. He merely told them not to do it again.

That took place not during the heat of a hard-fought political campaign but in September, 1971. Mr. Ehrlichman's complacent acceptance of such criminal behavior is on a par with former Attorney General Mitchell's participation without public disclosure, much less denunciation, in conferences early in 1972 to discuss the illegal "bugging" of the offices of the Democratic National Committee. Mr. Nixon may find it easy to understand such attitudes on the part of high officials. Most citizens do not.

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Even more dismaying is the planned obstruction of justice in the Watergate case by senior Administration officials, as reported in the news columns of this newspaper today. When an atmosphere of criminality prevails in the highest levels of the Administration, it is impossible to know what other public business may be tainted with fraud.

Under these circumstances, Mr. Nixon cannot plausibly say that in some vague way both parties and all of America are to blame. He cannot assert that Watergate "has claimed far too much of my time and my attention" and that he now intends to busy himself with other matters. He cannot play a game of musical chairs inside his Administration and declare that moving about a few insiders is sufficient to restore public confidence. Such acts and attitudes are an affront to the public.

The full facts on this monstrous interference with the political process are unlikely ever to come out until prosecution is removed from control by this Administration. The Senate has pointed the way the White House must follow. It has approved without dissent a resolution offered by Senator Percy, Republican of Illinois, calling for nomination of a distinguished special prosecutor from outside the executive branch and for his confirmation by the Senate. Representative John Anderson, Republican of Illinois, has introduced a similar resolution in the House, which also deserves prompt approval. It is significant and encouraging that members of the President's own party in Congress have taken the lead in urging this essential action.

Finally, however, the ball returns to President Nixon. It is up to him to recognize that, important as are international negotiations, inflation and other public problems, what matters now is the breakdown of public confidence in his Administration. He cannot cope with specific problems on a business-as-usual basis as if Watergate were a minor diversion. It was neither a caper nor an isolated event; it was proof that something is radically wrong in the central relationships of this Administration. Mr. Nixon's task is to focus on repairing confidence by developing new relationships with his staff and Cabinet, with Congress and with the people. Nothing else can be accomplished until the President begins to put those relationships on the right basis—the basis of candor, lawfulness, mutual respect and sound constitutional practice in the conduct of the public's business.