

By Theodore M. Hesburgh

NOTRE DAME, Ind.—It may be premature to try to put Watergate into any reasonable perspective. The whole country has been grievously wounded and vacillates between indignation and shock, both of which are amply fed by each day's revelation of new perfidy in ever-widening circles.

There are those who rejoice that the mighty have fallen from their seats of arrogant power, but this is an empty joy when we consider that what we have all dearly loved from our youth—our country—is what has been wounded. The malefactors, as they are caught and convicted, may be removed. The hurt remains; the wound festers; our Government is diminished and we with it, both here and around the world.

What really went wrong? Somehow the Government in Washington was handed over to a sizable group of petty men, hucksters, in fact, who were more interested in holding power than the proper use of power, more concerned with blind loyalty than integrity, more taken with images than substance, more ready to manipulate than to minister, seeking privilege for the powerful at a price rather than serving the poor, promoting lawlessness of every sort here and abroad while preaching law and order, faithless to the Constitution while raising a false banner of victorious honor.

When criticized legitimately, they attacked hypocritically from positions of power, presuming themselves to be above the law. Evidence was falsified or destroyed. Those who had sworn to uphold the Constitution flouted it. The best description of it all was voiced centuries ago by Shakespeare:

"Oh what a tangled web we weave, when first we practice to deceive."

The American people took all too long to develop indignation. Concern was left to the harassed few who suffered persecution while seeking to expose injustice and malfeasance. It is no great tribute to the values or concern of the rank and file of citizens that it took an incredible series of the crassest breaches of public honesty and law before the country at large finally became aroused. The President should confer a medal on the judge, the Senator and the journalists who would not be cowed.

Have we become so inured to unethical behavior on the part of those who govern us that we are beyond surprise or indignation whatever the crime?

How did we come to such a sorry pass, we who prided ourselves on government of the people, by the people, for the people, with liberty and justice for all?

First of all, as a people, we grew slack in our own personal moral commitment, in so many of the ordinary aspects of personal life, increasingly blunting our total moral sensitivity as a nation. Vietnam was certainly part of it. "Anything goes if you're not caught" was another part. Shoddiness of performance, cheating on the job, lying for gain, misrepresenting a product, believing that might makes right, callousness in dealing with the poor and the powerless, suffering age-old injustices to continue, lack of compassion, disregard of conscience and persecuting without mercy those who take conscience seriously, disregard for the sanctity of life—all these failings are common enough in the nation today. Perhaps we are getting the government we deserve.

Maybe we needed Watergate to awaken us to our real crisis, which is an inner moral malaise affecting us all. Maybe we needed to see what happens when unbridled hucksterism is allowed to reign supreme. What do we do now? Here are three suggestions.

● Our election laws need thorough revision, especially as to the provision of strictly limited quasipublic funds by tax rebate or other means, elimination of private funds buying privilege, and a reduction of the time span of campaigns.

● There needs to be provision for special penalties in the criminal code relating to those acts that breach the public trust, such as political espionage, wiretapping political opponents, and surreptitious political contributions.

● We have to derive some optimism from the fact that there are many good and noble Americans in this nation, men and women of both political parties who are capable of recreating the vision of what most Americans want this nation to be. They can be enlisted and put to work, for this is a national emergency. General Haig and Leonard Garment are a good beginning. With them and other such Americans, we can begin to reorder our priorities as a nation and to regain our birthright in truth and justice.

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