

By Henry S. Reuss

WASHINGTON—It is not necessary to give credence to the hearsay of John Dean and James McCord to conclude that the Administration is badly wounded. Even if we assume its elected leadership to have been entirely unaware of the illicit activities and of the subsequent cover-up, Mr. Nixon and Mr. Agnew must bear the responsibility for the actions of their Administration — for the men chosen to administer, and for its moral tone.

Is it possible for the Administration to exercise effective leadership through the remainder of its term?

The two former Cabinet members to whom Mr. Nixon was closest stand indicted for perjury, conspiracy to defraud the Government, and conspiracy to obstruct justice. His two closest personal staff members are nervously awaiting the action of a grand jury, and his former White House counsel is desperately bargaining for immunity. His top White House and campaign staff have been deeply implicated.

Public confidence in the Administration could not be expected to continue under those conditions, and it has not.

Mr. Nixon has been hurt in Congress, where members of his own party are beginning to regard association with him as a liability rather than an asset. Thirty-five Republicans provided the margin by which the House struck funds for the Cambodia bombing. The Republican membership of the previously hawkish Senate Appropriations Committee has voted unanimously to deny funds for all military activities in Laos as well as Cambodia.

We can operate under a damaged Presidency for a short time. We did so briefly under Warren Harding and Lyndon Johnson. But we cannot afford to do so for three-and-a-half years. What is to be done?

On the one hand, we can continue with our damaged President. We can watch the alienation between the American people and their Government increase, and we can abandon real hope for a vigorous attack on our pressing national problems before 1977.

On the other hand, there is impeachment—which would bring the business of Government to a halt for months or perhaps years, and which would be immensely divisive and destructive whether Mr. Nixon retained or lost his office.

Neither choice is satisfactory. But there may be a way out. It is not available at the option of the Congress or of the people. The decision lies

entirely in the hands of Mr. Nixon and Mr. Agnew.

A 1792 law provides for the "resignation of the office of President or Vice President . . . delivered into the office of the Secretary of State." If Mr. Nixon and Mr. Agnew were to conclude that they were fully responsible for their Administration and that their Administration has been compromised, the option of resignation—in no way an admission of personal fault—is available.

It would follow the precedent of the Administration's own Attorney General. While not personally implicated, Mr. Kleindienst felt his close association with many who were made his resignation in the national interest. He did not lose stature as a result.

Under the Succession Act of 1947, the Speaker of the House is next in line. Carl Albert, a man of unquestioned integrity, is also a Democrat, and the Democrats lost the 1972 election.

But, as part of the resignation procedure, the successor administration could draw the sting of partisanship by agreeing to conduct a bipartisan coalition of national unity for the next three and one-half years. This could include:

The naming by the new President, and the confirmation by the Congress, under the 25th Amendment, of a Republican as Vice President, selected by the Republican party under its chosen procedures;

Appointment of leading Republicans to roughly half the Cabinet posts;

All appointments, from ambassadorships on down, on the basis of merit rather than patronage, to be monitored by an advisory committee of Republicans;

Republicans, in and out of Congress, to participate in policy-making at all stages.

With the end of the Indochina war in sight, and with both parties on familiar terms with modern economics, the differences between the two parties are not so deep as to shake apart a coalition for the next three and one-half years. Indeed, a clean break with the past, and an era of goodwill under a bipartisan government, may be what we need in any case. Then, in 1976, after needed reforms have been made, we could celebrate our bicentennial by returning to political competition.

At the moment, Mr. Nixon and Mr. Agnew are preparing to battle it out. In the national interest as well as their own, they might consider an alternative.

*Henry S. Reuss is a Democratic Congressman from Wisconsin.*