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Truths And Consequences

There is reason to believe—from both opinion polls and the reactions of politicians—that much of America is ready “to turn Watergate over to the courts . . . and get on with the business of the nation,” as President Nixon suggested in his television talk last week.

While many substantial factual questions remain unresolved, it seems clear that most Americans have heard enough to make their own judgments on the larger issues involved in the case. That judgment is unflinchingly and overwhelmingly critical of the President and his handling of the matter; it has not wavered in the last three months, and Mr. Nixon's reiterated protestation of legal innocence last week is unlikely to soften that harsh verdict.

By ignoring this last chance for a detailed answer to the questions that have been raised about him, Mr. Nixon in effect abandoned any hope of a quick or dramatic restoration of his shriveled credibility. He settled for a more modest goal—the reassertion of his desire to remain in office and to “get on once again with meeting your problems.” And that is something the American people, fearful of a change in national leadership at a time of great economic uncertainty, are quite willing for him to do. No forced resignation or impeachment is in sight.

So the legacy of Watergate, we can now say with some assurance, will be a protracted period—over three years—in which the American government is led by a crippled Chief Executive. We are left with what Stewart Alsop has called a paraplegic presidency, and it now behooves us to examine some of the more important costs and consequences of that condition. Here are some that come to mind:

- The budget will be higher. A weakened President will have trouble holding Republicans in line to sustain vetoes of popular spending bills for schools, health and public facilities. From now on, more and more Republicans will tend to “vote their districts” rather than hewing to the administration line. The upshot: Either Mr. Nixon will have to give ground on his budget or risk being overridden on future vetos.

- The domestic initiatives on the President's second-term agenda are likely to be stymied for the indefinite future. Reorganization of the executive branch of government; the shutdown or phaseout of Great Society programs that Mr. Nixon deemed unproductive; the shift of emphasis from old-line categorical programs to new forms of revenue sharing—all these now become highly problematical. Essentially, Watergate has erased the mandate and the momentum for domestic reform that the President derived from the election landslide. From this point on, he is likely to be in a defensive posture on domestic issues, husbanding his strength to block those enactments of the Democratic Congress he finds most unpalatable, but rarely able to impose his own design on the opposition legislature.

- Facing frustrations on the home front, the President may well focus his energies on the foreign policy field even more than he did in his first four and a half years in office. From his vantage point, the chance for solid accomplishment and the achievement of an honorable place in history must now lie almost wholly in the construction of a new balance of power with Japan, China, Russia and Western Europe. Difficult as it will be to bargain with Brezhnev, Chou, Tanaka and Brandt on trade and troops and arms control, the hope of success and ultimate rewards are greater there than in combat with Ervin, Muskie and the congressional Democrats on housing and health programs, environmental laws and taxes.

- The great unanswered question, which clearly preoccupies Dr. Kissinger, is how far the damage of Watergate will diminish the President's prospects for success even in the foreign field. Congress will be more assertive, and the Cambodian bombing cutoff may be the portent of future legislative actions to limit the President's options in national security matters.

But, so far, there is no hard evidence that Watergate has weakened the President's diplomatic hand—in part because most foreign governments view the scandal as far less significant than does the American public. History and common sense suggest, however, that over the long haul, a President can be no bolder and stronger in his international dealings than his domestic political base allows. So there may be a price to be paid in the diplomatic sector as well.

All this suggests that the costs of Watergate for both the President and the country are major and long-lasting. To think that such a calamity could occur at the center of our government without such costs would be naive. And naivete—like so many other things—has become a scarce commodity in recent months.