

It Will Not Down

By Anthony Lewis

BOSTON, Oct. 14—For more than a year now, from the first smell of the Watergate cover-up through the decline and fall of Spiro Agnew, a question has haunted the politics of this country: Is there any way to restore the faith of Americans, their belief in their leaders and themselves, while Richard Nixon remains President?

It is in the nature of politics and politicians to avoid fundamental questions, to compromise, to forget, to move on. Washington has seen many efforts to do just that about the Nixon question, and not only on the part of the President himself. A curious recent example was Senator Howard Baker's fatuous assurance that Watergate was behind us. Another is the evident desire of some to treat the whole Agnew affair as a minor unpleasantness, a ripple.

Avoidance and forgetfulness are necessary political devices; we do not want a state of continuous battle. But there are some questions that will not go away, and this is one.

If Mr. Nixon had shaken the constitutional assumptions of the American system by only a single act or a limited course of conduct, it might indeed be possible to overlook that as a sport—or to live with disagreement in that area. But the whole point of his Presidency is that there have been no discernible limits to his contempt for established principle, and for law.

This President has proclaimed his right to use the military forces of the United States in secret, without consulting Congress or the public. He has said that he has power to carry on a war in the face of explicit disapproval

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by a majority of both houses of Congress. He has asserted an inherent power to wiretap, spy and commit burglaries in the name of national security. He has claimed personal exemption from the rule of law.

Again, there would be a strong argument for accommodation if Mr. Nixon had shown a willingness to learn from the trauma he has inflicted on the country — if he had any reserves of the humility that is the hallmark of strength. But he has learned nothing. He knows no course other than insisting that all's for the best, that we have peace with honor, that the country grows richer by the hour.

Anyone who still hoped to find some residual dignity or sensitivity in the man should have been disabused by the charade as he announced his choice of Gerald Ford for Vice President. That scene in the East Room of the White House was the most repellent American public ceremony in memory.

The very idea of a televised tease over the name was contemptible. If it was to be a public occasion, it should have been a solemn one before Congress. The man who gave us Agnew—and Mitchell, Stans, Haldeman, Ehrlichman, Colson, Liddy, Hunt, Krogh, Dean, Magruder and Chapin—grinned as he unveiled his next choice. There was not the slightest sense of responsibility for what had passed, not the least reference to the grisly reason for this occasion.

The vulgarity of the scene would not ordinarily be worth noticing. But in this case form and content were uncomfortably mixed. For the viewer inevitably found himself asking: Why should so many leading members of Congress have come to lend themselves to such a performance? (Mike Mansfield did have the sense to stay away.) Can Americans in general respond to such stuff? Is that our country? The answer has to be no: Richard Nixon's values are not America's. Either that or all of us give up our vision of this country. We really have to stop pretending that Mr. Nixon is somehow going to change, going to conform to the old American dream of an enlightened society governed by law. It is a question of character, and he has made clear that his cannot change.

Slowly, inexorably, the country is perceiving that it cannot avoid the fundamental question of Richard Nixon's leadership. Even Congress, that most reluctant body of heroes, is coming to face the difficult truth. And the process cannot be stopped. If Mr. Agnew is condemned for tax evasion, if Mr. Ford understands that he must open his tax and financial records, will Congress let the President continue to shelter his questioned dealings? That is not possible.

It is in the light of the Nixon question that Gerald Ford has to be judged. He is a man who would hardly have been considered for President on his own merits; a dim figure whose most imaginative declaration was that "an impeachable offense is whatever a majority of the House of Representatives considers it to be at a given moment in history." (That statement, in 1970, was aimed at Justice William O. Douglas.)

But on all the evidence so far, Mr. Ford is honorable. He is a viable alternative to Mr. Nixon, in fact a better one than we have had before now. Most important, he has his own political roots, and he cannot therefore be what Mr. Nixon would wish—an absolute assurance of his own survival.

People are still reluctant to think of forcing a President from office, but they are beginning to understand that it may be unavoidable. For as long as Mr. Nixon is there, it will be as Edgar said in "King Lear":

*The worst is not
So long as we can say, "This is
the worst."*