



The Inquiry Into Nixon's Honesty

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"PEOPLE have a right to know whether or not their President is a crook," Mr. Nixon said the other day. But how are we going to find out?

Certainly not from the series of personal appearances the President has been making in what the White House is pleased to call "Operation Candor." Mr. Nixon is, in fact, one of the least trustworthy witnesses on his own behalf.

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FOR BETTER or worse — and it is not always for the worst — Mr. Nixon has in his makeup far less psychological space for failure than most men. When things get tough he fights back, and when they go wrong he tends to blame others. Hence, his recent contretemps with former Attorney General Elliot Richardson about the firing of special Watergate prosecutor Archibald Cox.

Mr. Richardson is a man prone to present controversial points in highly abstract formulations. Those formulations are often obscure in their meaning, and few men are less well-equipped to divine their sense than the unsubtle soldier who now serves as the White House chief of staff, General Alexander Haig. So it is entirely possible that General Haig did not understand Mr. Richardson when Haig served as Richardson's pipeline to the President.

But the President and General Haig could not admit such weaknesses. Instead they implied that Richardson lied.

If we cannot expect to get the beginning of what we need to know from Mr. Nixon, there are also limitations on the

investigations being conducted by the special Senate committee and the Watergate prosecutor. The Senate committee is limited, in its jurisdiction. It has to stick to matters relevant to the presidential campaign, which means it cannot go into such clearly important transactions as the President's tax returns or the payments made on his homes in Key Biscayne and San Clemente.

An impeachment proceeding knows no such bounds. The House Judiciary Committee, to which the impeachment resolutions have been referred, is setting up to go into an across-the-board investigation of Mr. Nixon and his conduct as President. It will center on the large question of whether Mr. Nixon abused the public trust.

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THE ORGANIZATION of this inquiry is necessarily going to be an extremely difficult and messy operation. The Judiciary Committee has 38 members broken into factions. The hearings are probably going to be full of partisan rancor. They will probably arrive only at a general judgment as to whether or not Mr. Nixon betrayed his trust.

For these reasons, other methods would probably have been preferable. It would still be better if Mr. Nixon on the confirmation of Gerald Ford to be Vice President, resigned. But failing that there is no alternative. For bad as it may be, there is one thing worse for the country than impeachment. That would be to sweep under the rug the issue which has now been posed — the issue of whether, in the large moral and intellectual sense, the President is a crook.