

By William Greider

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THE TOWN IS AWASH in the epic legalities of impeachment—the scholarly arguments over what's a high crime, the multiple Watergate indictments with others still to come, the close details of who buzzed the White House tapes. Yet the fate of Richard Nixon may also depend, in some mysterious manner, on the primitive legacy of people like the Shilluk who lived along the White Nile.

The Shilluk, like the Khazars in southern Russia and the Egbas of West Africa and others in ancient Cambodia, viewed their leaders as the embodiment of the state. It is a sentiment as old as the first attempts by humans to organize themselves into leaders and followers, and it is part of the trauma America is going through today: that what befalls the leader threatens the populace.

It is evoked by the remark of the Rev. Sun Myung Moon, the flamboyant Korean evangelist who has taken up Mr. Nixon's defense: "America is in the process of slowly killing her President again." It is somewhere in Senate Republican leader Hugh Scott's warning to his congressional

The scholarly experts agree only on one point — that the presidency means, much more to the American people than one man named Richard Nixon or his job as chief officer of the national government, that the talk about removing him or putting him on trial summons up deep, unspoken feelings. Beyond that, the subject is so speculative that everyone is entitled to his own opinion, confident that no expert will be able to prove him wrong.

Since last June, the public opinion polls have presented a persistent paradox. A growing majority has disapproved of Mr. Nixon's performance, considering him guilty of one thing or another, and would like to see him out of office. Yet only a fraction has favored impeachment. The percentage supporting impeachment has increased slowly and steadily, but most are reluctant to opt for that extreme measure.

When *The Washington Post* polled voters in key precincts earlier this year, the results reflected the same disparity toward Mr. Nixon and impeachment. In the sample of several hundred voters, 73 per cent thought he had participated in the Watergate cover-up, yet only 19 per cent favored impeachment.

In recent weeks, Mr. Nixon has been employing the style and gestures of presidential action in a way that is vital to his future. His stock went up slightly after his State of the Union speech (2 points in the Gallup Poll). And he has made speeches which, unintended or not, have invited listeners to compare his travail with Lincoln's, to identify the fate of the President with the nation itself, as was the habit of the ancient Shilluk and the Khazars and the Cambodians and the Egbas.

Signs of Veneration

THESE ANCIENT PEOPLES, however, had a different way of dealing with this sentiment. Indeed, the idea of the king as embodiment of the state lies beneath the crude use of regicide in the earliest phases of community and government.

Among the Khazars in southern Russia, the medieval kings were liable to be put to death at the end of a fixed term or whenever some public calamity occurred—drought, famine, defeat in war—which suggested that their natural powers were failing. In Cambodia, the mystic kings of fire

colleagues: "History does not look kindly on regicide." It is implied by Ralph Nader when he calls it "a feeling that impeachment is a collective lopping-off of the symbol of the presidency . . . The presidency itself has attained such a regal pedestal that even a corrupt occupant of that office finds the presidency a shield. There's a feeling that if you throw out a corrupt guy, you tarnish the office, when it should be the other way around."

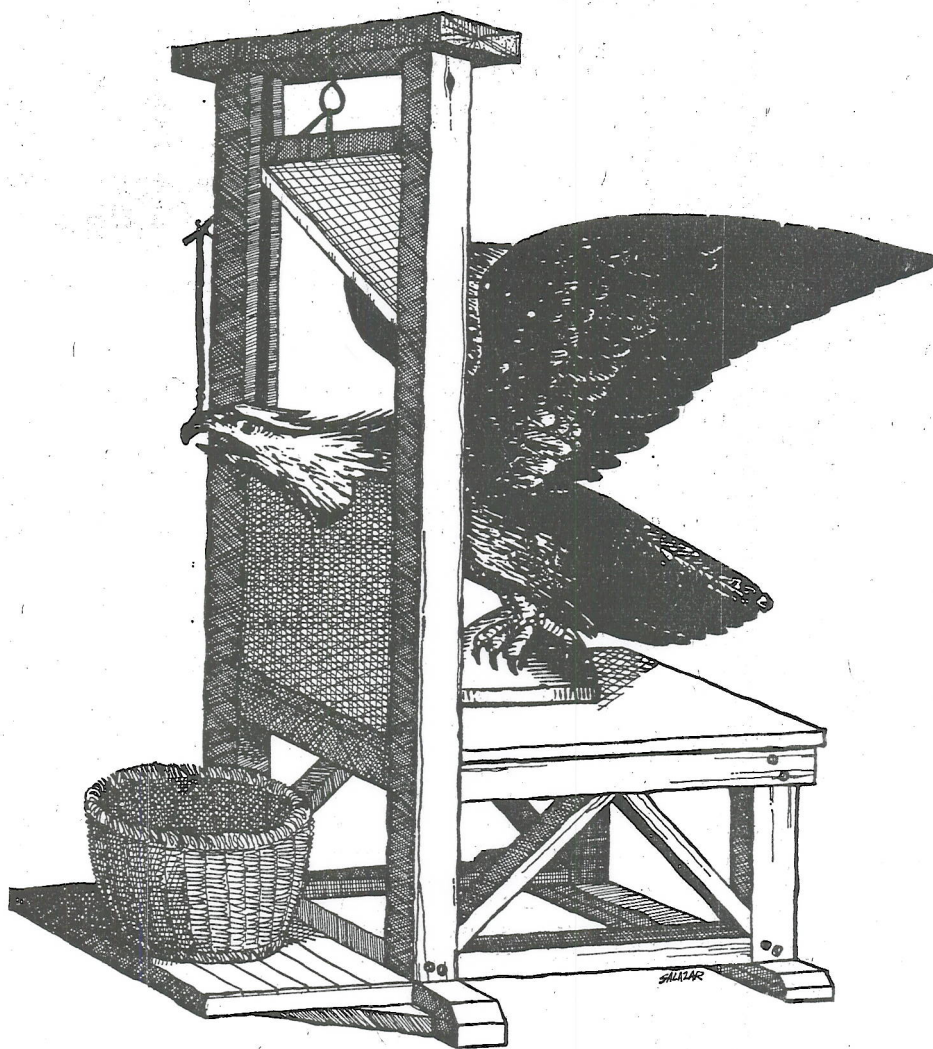
It is evoked, in another way, by Carol Kramer in Madison, Wis., when she explains why people hesitate to join the pro-impeachment movement she is helping to organize: "It's a funny thing. People are very much afraid of the impeachment thing. I think it's the Oedipus complex—not destroying your father image. You don't want to kill your own father."

Do Americans really think of Richard Nixon as their father? Or their king? Standing such notions so directly may give them as absurd flavor, but there is something here which is real, elusive feelings that are behind the public attitudes on impeachment yet beyond precise definition. For some it is an ancient trembling, a fear of unknown harm that might lie ahead. For others there is a secret exhilaration, a chill at the notion of toppling so powerful a figure.

NIXON'S FATE—AND OURS

The Fear of Following the Leader

"A few years back the Gallup Poll asked Americans which famous people, living or dead, they would most like to have visit them in their homes. Lincoln was first, followed by four other American Presidents. Jesus Christ came in 11th, just behind Harry Truman."



By Robert Salazar for The Washington Post

When the voters were asked for instant responses to Mr. Nixon's name, most answers were negative, with many extremely hostile: "Dishonest" and "cheater" and "chicken" and "a big nothing" among others. But the responses also conveyed a natural sympathy for anyone stuck with the job of chief executive: "Unfortunate" and "a victim" and "poor guy" and "doing the best he can."

There are, of course, practical reasons behind the public's reluctance to impeach. H. Stanton Evans, the conservative theoretician and editor of the Indianapolis Star, thinks it is simply a matter of emphasis and attention. Constant controversy over Watergate has diminished the President's popularity, but Evans says, "To most people I run into, Watergate isn't that important."

The fear of impeachment also reflects a practical desire for stability in troubled times. "There's a feeling," says Professor Fred I. Greenstein of Princeton, "that if you pull a couple of more pegs out, the whole thing might fall apart."

Yet, as Evans says, "There is this reverence for the office, whoever occupies it, and the occupant inherits a great deal of this. Obviously Nixon is taking advantage of that."

and water were not allowed to die a natural death. When one fell ill, the elders stabbed him to death and a new king with full powers was chosen.

Among the Shilluk, even in modern times, the king was killed when he became senile or unable to satisfy the sexual demands of his wives. Sir James George Frazier, who explored these ancient currents in his classic, "The Golden Bough," explained why:

"... However strange it may seem to us, their custom of putting the divine king to death as soon as he shows signs of ill-health or failing strength springs directly from their profound veneration for him and from their anxiety to preserve him, or rather the divine spirit by which he is animated, in the most perfect state of efficiency.

"Nay, we go further and say that their practice of regicide is the best proof they can give of the high regard in which they hold their kings. For they believe that the king's life or spirit is so sympathetically bound up with the prosperity of the whole country that, if he fell ill or grew senile, the cattle would sicken and cease to multiply, the crops would rot in the fields and men would perish of widespread disease."

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A missionary among the Eghas of West Africa also wrote in 1881 about their curious custom of judging and punishing the king:

"Should he have earned the hatred of his people by exceeding his rights, one of the councillors on whom the heavy duty is laid, requires of the prince that he shall 'go to sleep,' which means simply, 'take poison and die.' If his courage fails him at the supreme moment, a friend renders him this last service..."

Does some echo of those ancient practices remain in ourselves, like a faint tracing from the imprint of the past? Some who studied the presidency and the American attitudes toward it see patterns which also have a flavor of mystical faith.

"There's something clearly in the American fiber," says Prof. Greenstein of Princeton. "I suspect it's our secular history, the written Constitution and the mystique of nationhood that has persisted, and the presidency is the most prominent and visible symbol of that."

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James MacGregor Burns, a presidential historian, describes the overtones: "We're all so much psychologically involved in the presidency. It does go back to the Freudian element. There's a psychological thing about the president as head of the family. If you attack Nixon, you're attacking us."

Walt Whitman, whose political sentiments made great poetry, mourned the dead Lincoln in those terms:

*For you they call, the swaying mass,
their faces turning;
Here Captain! Dear father!
This arm beneath your head!*

John Kennedy's death inspired similar emotions, encapsulated in a poem by William Butler:

*Drums, drums, I too am dead.
I breathe no breath, but only dread.
I have no soul, but lay my head
Upon his soul, and on that bed
I stop.*

Nixon's Fate-and Ours: Fear of the Unknown



Mike Peters in the Dayton Daily News

Everyone knows, from countless studies, that the president, any president, is the most visible emblem of government. A 1970 poll found that 98 per cent of American adults knew his name. Only 57 per cent knew one senator from their state, only 39 per cent knew their own congressman, and only 32 per cent knew the speaker of the House. (In fact, a 1972 Gallup Poll in Great Britain discovered that among admired leaders, Richard Nixon tied Prince Phillip for first—ahead of Britain's own prime minister.)

What is it that people feel about the office, apart from how they feel about the man who currently holds it?

"We don't know what well-springs of human behavior go into the feelings about leadership," says Greenstein. "I suspect that within each adult there is a child, and child-

ren are awed by overwhelming figures. It's like the stories about when John F. Kennedy telephoned directly to low-ranking officials in his administration. The bureaucrats stood at attention when they talked to him on the phone."

In his book on the presidency, George Reedy, the former Lyndon Johnson aide, described the popular proportions of the office: "By the 20th century, the presidency had taken on all the regalia of monarchy except for ermine robes, a scepter and crown. The President was not to be jostled by a crowd—unless he elected to subject himself to do so during those moments when he shed his role as chief of state and mounted the hustings as a candidate for re-election. The ritual of shaking hands with the President took on more and more the coloration of the medieval 'king's touch' . . ."

Another presidential scholar, James David Barber at Duke, complains about the magical qualities which many people assign to the office: "We elect men, not gods, and the president is not the Wizard of Oz."

Greenstein's research has taken him into interviews with children, partly on the assumption that children reflect idealized attitudes in a straightforward manner while similar beliefs may be submerged in adults. The children see the president as a benevolent leader. Even in post-Watergate interviews, Greenstein found that the idealized references persisted, though the children were emphasizing presidential power rather than his good works.

"If you ask what the president does," says the professor, "the answers are fairly child-like. He takes care of the country. He makes peace with other countries. He sees that everyone has enough to eat. It's a long-standing American tradition of using presidents for hero worship. There is something like an incest taboo in saying you're actually going to dethrone a president."

Even a president with declining popularity draws benefits from this quality. Any gesture or action which conveys "presidential qualities" should produce at least short-term sympathy. Mr. Nixon's rating, for instance, went up 7 points in the Gallup Poll when he welcomed the astronauts home from their first moon landing. His popularity went up 12 points after his Vietnamization speech of October, 1969.

Even clumsy presidential action can help. President Kennedy gained 10 points after the disaster of Bay of Pigs. Eisenhower went up 6 points after the international embarrassment of the U-2 incident.

"An Article of Faith"

THE CLOSE IDENTITY between the people and the president was demonstrated most vividly after the Kennedy assassination, a national trauma which literally made people physically ill. A national survey found that, in the four days after the slaying, 43 per cent of the people suffered loss of appetite, 48 per cent had insomnia, 25 per cent had headaches, 68 per cent reported general nervousness, 26 per cent experienced rapid heart beat and other symptoms of anxiety.

According to Greenstein, historical ac-

counts suggest other presidential deaths produced similar responses—Lincoln, Roosevelt, McKinley, Garfield, even Harding.

"In responding to the president, citizens also seem to be seeking to satisfy expressive needs of which they are only vaguely aware—for example, needs for confidence, security and pride in citizenship," Greenstein concludes.

Impeachment is not fatal, of course. The pro-impeachment advocates argue that a House vote for impeachment would merely be a quasi-legal determination of "probable cause," setting the issues for trial, nothing more. The public, however, apparently attaches greater meaning to it. In symbolic terms, the public might be right. The humiliation of placing the chief of state, the surrogate king, on trial, placing him figuratively in the dock to be judged, might be almost as traumatic as conviction itself.

Reedy suggests that impeachment also threatens something else in the American psyche—the deeply embedded assumption that, when a president is elected, he serves a fixed term of four years, through fair weather or foul. "Because we have been living with this since 1789," Reedy says, "there is sort of a subconscious feeling of this among the people. That may sound a little mystical, but I don't think it's far-fetched. It's an article of faith. There are certain things we believe in, and that's one of them. There's almost a superstitious fear of messing around with the fixed term. When you start playing with absolutes, people get very shaky."

All of these elements inhibit the process which has now begun. Yet it is also reasonable to assume that impeachment arouses certain ancient emotions of satisfaction, the sense of tragedy and catharsis which was part of those early rituals of regicide.

Between death and disgrace, recent history been hard on presidents. As Barber points out, even the most popular presidents begin office with an overwhelming surge of support, then are gradually diminished as they become lightning rods for all of the ills of the nation.

"Heroic tragedy has an enduring quality," Barber muses. "We seem to get something out of raising the guy up and then watching him fall. It's kind of a curious satisfaction in that story that we see happen over and over again."