

The Waves and the Tides

By James Reston

WASHINGTON, March 21—Something's going on here besides the impeachment process. The peach blossoms are out on Florencio Olquin's tree in our kitchen garden. George Shultz is leaving the Treasury, but the tulip trees outside his executive palace are opening up from purple to pink. Even at the White House, which is the central battleground of our politics, the grass is now emerald green, the boxwood is billowing with buds under the white columns, and the star magnolias are flowering on the first day of spring.

So the natural life of the country goes on. It does not depend on whether Shultz or Nixon, Kennedy or Jackson or Wallace go or stay, rise or fall. The nation has a life of its own—look at its numbers, its resources, its blood and vitality, its progress despite all its troubles, the way it people stride along their way and swing their arms and live their lives regardless of politics—an element, healthy, self-renewing family, like nature itself in the spring.

This process of renewal is going on in Washington these days underneath the headlines. Watergate was a virus, a disease in the body of the nation, and attention is now fixed properly on the agents of infection. But beyond all the arguments over the past, over impeachment and the definitions of impeachment, the corrective impulses of the nation are at work.

Sometimes these corrective impulses surface in the protest and conscience of a single man, like Senator Buckley of New York. His logic was fuzzy but his character was true. Sometimes they come out of the instincts of a judge like John Sirica or the periodic outbursts of a natural, decent man like Senator Goldwater. But mainly the skeptical wisdom of the Founding Fathers, who understood the frailty of human nature, has come to bear on the present conflict between the Presidency, the Legislature and the courts.

The Congress is not only looking fearfully to the impeachment of a President for the first time in a hundred years, but is also looking to the future. Nobody outside is paying much attention, but it is drafting laws to correct and forbid the campaign financing scandals of the 1972 election, to protect private citizens, public officials and the press from invasions of their privacy. And the Congress is also defining new rules to forbid espionage and sabotage of future political campaigns. In short, the renewal processes of an essentially healthy political system are beginning to work.

In the storms of the last winter, this wide inquiry of press, courts and Congress has already brought down

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a lot of tall weak trees like Messrs. Ehrlichman, Haldeman, Mitchell and Dean, and is now shaking the President himself; but the main thing is that the system itself should endure.

Mr. Nixon has understood this point, for he keeps wrapping himself in the Presidency, and, ironically, it may be that after Watergate for him, as after Chappaquiddick for Mr. Kennedy, they may both be better men and more reliable public servants. But whatever the personal tragedies, the integrity of the Republic has to come first.

The weakness of the President's defense is that he argues he cannot be held accountable for the offenses of his Administration without destroying the system; that the President cannot be wounded without destroying the Presidency. In short, that he is what he merely represents. This is the illusion that has ruined more prominent politicians, bureaucrats and journalists in Washington than anything else.

What is important here now, however, is that the enduring things, like the continuity of nature, prevail. If it is true that the impeachment of the President in the House, and his conviction in the Senate, would really wreck the Presidency, as he suggests, then it is obviously too high a price to pay.

But this argument probably underestimates the strength of America, and is a rebuke to its political system. For it insists on the presumption that the Republic and the Presidency depend on supporting and following Mr. Nixon, ignoring the judgment of the courts, permitting him to decide what evidence should be available to the House in his own case.

It does not make sense for Senator Buckley to argue that he thinks Mr. Nixon is innocent of the charges against him but that he should resign. But neither does it make sense for Mr. Nixon to deny the charges and refuse the evidence that he says would prove his innocence.

All is not gloomy here. The crops are going into the fields and in the autumn the American harvests will be more important than diplomacy. The waves on the surface of the waters of the Western world are troubled, but underneath deep tides are running. The blunders and tragedies of the past are forcing reappraisal of the Presidency, the Congress, the courts, and even the relations between American and its adversaries and allies. It will be a long, hard process, but there is something in the old democratic fog yet. It is working its way, and searching for the facts.