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Respect For The Rules

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By Anthony Lewis

BOSTON, May 8—When Willy Brandt resigned as Chancellor of the Federal German Republic, he gave the briefest of official explanations: "I accept the political responsibility for negligence in connection with the Guillaume espionage affair." The next day, for his parliamentary colleagues, he added:

"My resignation is a result of my . . . respect for the unwritten rules of democracy, and is to prevent my personal and political integrity from being destroyed."

Distinct themes were woven together there. One was the duty to put system above self: Mr. Brandt was saying that West Germany's institutions were more important than any individual, that the country's interest was different from his own. The other was personal, human, a matter of character: There are things that count more in life, Brandt was saying, than holding public office.

When the Federal Republic was born, just 25 years ago this month, it had to be regarded as one of the frailest of democratic enterprises. Even if one could have put aside the horrors of the immediate past, there was almost nothing in German history to provide confidence that the self-restraint, the commitment to constitutional order needed to make democracy work would be found among the Republic's politicians.

Today West Germany is at least the equal of any other country in Western Europe in the confidence and stability of her institutions. A major, perhaps the decisive, reason has been the performance of Willy Brandt.

In his years as Chancellor the country faced severe tests of its Constitution, and passed them. There was the new coalition Government and the movement to the left. There was Brandt's Ostpolitik, breaking with all

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the shibboleths of the past. There were the tests of no-confidence votes and interim elections, met by Mr. Brandt without any trimming of principle.

His resignation is one more test of the Constitution, and in that sense a last great contribution on his part. For the West Germans will pass the test, will show that their fidelity is now to system rather than person.

Mr. Brandt's character was more important than his policy. He brought directness, simplicity, above all integrity. An American who was close to him said this week: "I'm convinced

that his lasting value, for the Germans and for the rest of us, was his demonstration that there can be moral integrity in politics. That is why he quit as he did, with the simple statement that he took responsibility."

Americans are bound to make the comparison with their own embattled President. It is an instructive one.

In all those pages of White House transcript, there is not a word of concern on Richard Nixon's part for the integrity of our constitutional process—for law, for the courts, for Congress, for the public that is the ultimate sovereign. There are only fear, hatred and contempt for others.

Instead of a willingness to face responsibility, even responsibility for the modest fault of negligence in controlling subordinates, there is a desperate search for ways to avoid it. Deception, public relations tricks, partisan maneuver, even crimes are to be preferred to truth.

Reading those transcripts, one perceives a man with no discernible commitment to any moral principle, with no interest in life save office and power: an empty human being, almost pathetic in his isolation and insecurity. The very rhetoric is mean, shabby, barren.

In Richard Nixon there is a total confusion of self and state. Like a child, he cannot see beyond the self; he therefore thinks that any attempt to curb him is wrong. His overpowering concern is for survival—his survival in office, at whatever cost to his country and its institutions. He is the Presidency.

Those who read the transcripts will find it hard to avoid The Wall Street Journal's conclusion that they "reveal a flawed mentality." Even Hugh Scott, the Senator Republican leader, now finds the performance "shabby, disgusting, immoral," and says he is "disturbed that there was not enough showing of moral indignation." (One wonders where Senator Scott's moral indignation was when he first read a transcript last January, but better late than never.)

What is happening these days is a public and political revulsion at the character of a President. It is precisely this situation that the Framers of our Constitution had in mind for impeachment. Madison spoke of a President's "negligence or perfidy" as reason for removing him, or his "betrayal of trust." Those generalities will underlie the specific crimes considered by the House Judiciary Committee.

But is it really necessary for this great country to go through months more of uncertainty and torment? Surely no one accepts any longer Mr. Nixon's claim that his survival is necessary for the sake of the Presidency. We do not have a parliamentary system, but the Constitution does envisage Presidents resigning. By that service Mr. Nixon could still hope to earn the gratitude of history.