

On this Fourth of July, Americans have to find a solid middle ground between complacency and disgust, between a vengeful moralism and the politics of cynicism.

In the year since the nation's last celebration of Independence Day, the people have seen the President of the United States named by a grand jury as an unindicted co-conspirator in an obstruction of justice case and the Vice President driven from office for taking bribes.

This Administration's first Attorney General has been indicted for various felonies, its second has pleaded guilty to a misdemeanor, and its third dismissed by the President for trying to defend the integrity of his office. A sizable number of high-level and middle-level former White House officials have been convicted of crimes.

The willingness of ordinary citizens to estimate their own taxes honestly and pay them promptly is a touchstone of their faith in their government and society. How dismaying then for Americans to discover in the past year that the former Vice President offered no defense to a charge of tax evasion, that the President since taking office had paid only derisory sums in Federal tax and evaded state tax altogether and that he had taken huge deductions that may be tainted with fraud. Those in power even tried to manipulate the tax system to punish their political opponents.

Equality before the law is the governing ideal of the American Revolution. In the past year, Americans have seen the President take refuge behind claims and pretensions noxious to a free people. Mr. Nixon, a citizen like every other man, a temporary servant of the people chosen to perform certain specified duties, speaks through his lawyers and press spokesmen as if he were a monarch.

The executive privilege of presidents is defined as if it were the royal prerogative. Evidence commanded by the courts is withheld, tampered with, and shuffled about. Valid subpoenas from the House of Representatives are ignored. Committees of the Congress are treated with ridicule and contempt. The Supreme Court is informed that its rulings will be obeyed only if the President deems them "definitive."

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Yet for all the dreary deceptions, scandals and law-breaking in high places, Americans believe that the dream of 1776 has not failed and that the structure of their government is sound. The grand juries and the courts are still doing their work. The labors of the impeachment inquiry go forward. The press is still free. Watergate will one day be a thing of the past.

Americans retain their basic confidence despite the shocks of the past year partly because they recognize that in the total calendar of the world's political crimes, Watergate is a relatively small folly. It shrinks when compared to the unspeakable crimes committed in countries with less fortunate histories.

Americans also keep their faith in themselves and their constitutional form of self-government because they perceive themselves, with perhaps a touch of self-righteousness, as a people who try to base their political decisions on conscious moral judgments. Gunnar Myrdal has expressed the view that this capacity for moral indignation, derived from the Puritan immigrants and from many later sources, is the nation's greatest strength. "For America, the high ideals may not always dominate, but they are always there, and Watergate has brought them out. . . . This deep sense of moral behavior is the essence of America—it is the glory of the nation, its youthful strength, and, in the end, perhaps the salvation of mankind."

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The danger in this morality is that it will induce an unjustified complacency. If viewed in a distant enough perspective, Watergate can be reduced to a mere molehill, a minor blemish. Yet those crimes were real crimes. Those betrayals of the people's trust were genuine betrayals, painful and damaging. To dismiss them as of no great consequence, to trivialize them as mostly an invention of the press, to accommodate oneself to the continuance of malefactors in high office would be as self-destructive as to accept them openly with a cynical shrug.

For both the immediate and the ultimate health of American society, impeachment remains the most exigent public business. It must be faced squarely. It cannot be shirked or shrugged away.

A people who do not call their officers of state to account and who do not impose the rule of law on every citizen are a people who are placing their liberties and their cherished Constitution in ultimate jeopardy. If Americans on this Fourth of July would avoid those risks and justify their sense of themselves as a responsible people, they have to repair the damage of Watergate and confront its implications. In their search for the dependable middle ground, they have to stiffen their moral concern with political courage, with that willingness to act against wrongdoers and to institute timely reform that is the surest safeguard of a nation's institutions.