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Political and Economic Malaise

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The fall of Richard Nixon, aside from the constitutional merits of the impeachment case against him, was propelled by strong tailwinds of national distrust in governmental power and purpose.

It came at a time of rising apprehension within many Americans over their economic future—deep, visceral fears fueled by rising interest rates, spiraling prices, a bear market, job layoffs and the specters of food and energy shortages.

Much of what has been worrying the country may well be beyond the power of any President to assuage. But there seems little doubt that the gnawing sense of political and economic malaise has deeply eroded public support for President Nixon, beyond the crimes of Watergate and the cover-up.

The polls indicated that on the eve of his nation the President enjoyed the confidence of only 1 out of every 4 Americans. Two-thirds of the nation wanted him impeached. Nearly 8 out of every 10 Americans felt he

was botching up the economy. By 3 to 1 the majority believed the general policies of his administration were doing more harm than good.

Clearly more than Watergate alone contributed to the precipitous decline of the President's popularity into the final months of his term.

When Lyndon Johnson performed his political abdication six years ago the all-too-simple explanation was that he was driven out of office by the Vietnam war. In fact there was a similar dissonant chorus of economic distress signals in the background, driving down the indices of presidential popularity.

Similarly as a political event the extinction of the Nixon presidency last night was the byproduct of a complex set of attitudinal forces that will keep the public opinion research industry busy for years.

To be sure, there was a prevailing sentiment on Capitol Hill—the jury of the President—that he was guilty of impeachable offenses. We will never know, of course, if such a climate

would have existed if everything else were humming along well on the domestic and international fronts.

But the Watergate and ensuing impeachment traumas evolved in a national atmosphere which, starting in the midst of the Vietnam war era, reflected a steady downward curve of public confidence in elected officials.

By the end of 1973, according to the respected University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research, nearly three-quarters of the electorate believed the government was being run on behalf of a "few big interests." More than half, 53 per cent, felt that "quite a few" of those in power are crooked.

Both of these indices of public cynicism about constituted authority were substantially higher than in the previous year. Specific trust in the presidency fell from 41 per cent in 1972 to 24 per cent in 1973, according to the University of Michigan survey.

These trends may well have reflected the onset of Watergate revelations throughout 1973. But the

pattern was beginning to set in much earlier, in the mid and late 1960s.

The great American disenchantment, at least as indicated in the findings of public opinion specialists, has become increasingly evident on the international front—despite the vaunted popularity of Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger in an administration which by and large had lost its appeal.

Lloyd A. Free, president of the Institute for International Social Research, wrote recently that despite Kissinger's "Most Admired Man" status in the Gallup Poll there was "a mood of uncertainty, even pessimism about U.S. foreign relations" prevailing in the electorate.

"Americans have begun to recognize," wrote Free, "the very real limits to U.S. power, especially in a world of nuclear stalemate. We have lost some of our faith that American political, economic, and military expertise can accomplish virtually anything."

The old confident sense of American omnipotence, in other words, was being shat-

Eroded Support of President

tered during the Nixon years.

Measurements of public attitudes toward America's future standing in the world showed that the country tended to view the past as rosier than the future. Over the past 10 years, Free's study suggested, the view Americans held of the power and importance of their country's position suffered a small but statistically significant decline.

While the United States

still is regarded as the paramount world power, the influence of the Soviet Union, China, Western Europe and Japan is perceived to be growing in the years ahead.

Detente, the foreign policy innovation on which President Nixon prided himself most, was also beginning to run into snags of public disfavor among organized labor, influential Jewish groups and adherents of hard-line anti-Communism.

All in all, the much-touted "emerging Republican majority" of the early Nixon years had fallen apart. In New York recently there was a demonstration of "hard hats" — once considered a solid ingredient of the Nixon coalition — against the President's economic policies.

Political psychiatry is a dangerous and often disagreeable business. Nonetheless, the psychic profile of

the nation as the Nixon presidency fell points to a state of public unrest which transcends the various crimes and the specific acts of presidential culpability which figured in the scandals of Watergate.

In a present moment, soon after his re-election, Mr. Nixon assayed his own future in the White House. "Second terms," he remarked at Camp David, "almost inevitably are downhill."