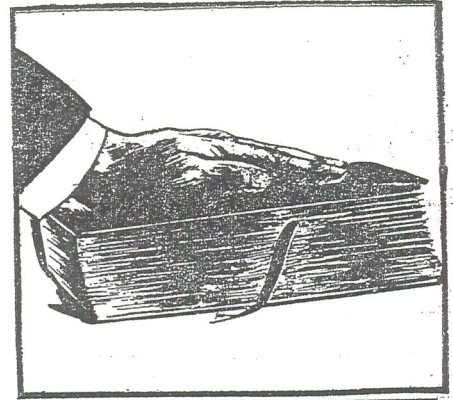


“‘Mother,’ said Nixon at 10, ‘I would like to become a lawyer—an honest lawyer who can’t be bought by crooks.’”



# The Moral Legacy: ‘My Advice Would Be to Stay Away’

“Thy death bed is no lesser than thy land  
Wherein thou liest in reputation  
sick . . .”

—John of Gaunt to Richard II, Shakespeare

“We have a cancer within, close to the presidency  
that is growing. It is growing  
daily . . .”

—John Dean to Richard Nixon

By Laurence Stern

JOHN W. DEAN III may have been the agent and the prophet of the undoing. But among the sad young men of the Watergate scandal wit was Gordon Strachan who gave the sharpest utterance to the moral legacy of the Nixon presidency.

Strachan was asked at the Senate Watergate committee hearings what advice he would give to young people about government service in view of his own plunge into “the Watergate pit.”

“My advice,” Strachan replied, “would be to stay away.”

This was Watergate’s leitmotif, sounded in varying tones by the contrite juniors and the weathered professionals — by the ruined and by the repentant.

Richard M. Helms, the former boss of the Central Intelligence Agency and a lifelong specialist in the uses of governmental craft, found himself making a strange admission during another Senate hearing that touched on Watergate.

“Giving assistance to the presidency,” he observed to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, “has not been a crime until relatively recently.”

Then came the transcripts, with their pornographic starkness, which revealed not the quest for truth as advertised by the President but a savage and frantic effort to keep the prosecutors off the trail leading toward the Oval Office.

The transcripts introduced into the lexicon of American politics a new vocabulary that seemed to be drawn from the language of back-street combat rather than sober presidential deliberation — such words as “stonewalling” and “hanging tough.”

While he was solemnly pledging to the American people a full investigation of Watergate, he was also, the transcripts revealed, rehearsing self-

## ‘My Advice Would Be to Stay Away’

exculpatory scenarios with Dean, John Ehrlichman and H. R. (Bob) Haldeman in the privacy of the Oval Office as the tape recorder quietly revolved.

“President: I didn’t tell him [Dean] to go get the money did I? Haldeman: No. President: You didn’t either, did you? Haldeman: Absolutely not! I said you got to talk to Mitchell. . . . President: We’ve got a pretty good record on that one, John, at least.”

A half century earlier, when Richard Nixon was 10, he was lying in front of the family fireplace with newspapers full of the new revelations of the Teapot Dome scandal spread over the floor, according to a reminiscence of his mother, Hannah Nixon.

Suddenly, Mrs. Nixon recounted to biographer Bela Kornitzer, young Nixon looked up and said: “Mother, I would like to become a lawyer — an honest lawyer who can’t be bought by crooks.”

When he launched his second campaign for the presidency in the nomination hall at Miami Beach in 1968, President Nixon promised to heed the “real voice of America” — that of “the forgotten Americans — the non-shouters, the non-demonstrators.”

**H**E PROMISED a rule of law and order. “Government can pass laws,” he said. “But respect for law can come only from people who take the law into their hearts and minds—and not into their hands.”

Five years later, when advised by Ehrlichman that a high-ranking Justice Department official, Robert Mardian, was coaching Watergate witnesses to lie, the President had this tape-recorded reaction:

“Oh.”

The newspapers that are now spread out in front of other fireplaces have made a hollow thing of President Nixon’s summons back to the old-fashioned virtues of work and thrift and civic orderliness.

The moral legacy he pledged has been mocked by the billowing revelations of Watergate. His personal real estate deals, his tax windfalls and loan transactions with private financiers all

seemed to give the lie to the “cloth coat” morality he once professed to follow.

It has added up to the greatest political scandal in American history, dwarfing Teapot Dome.

On the public opinion fever charts the moral atmosphere of the Nixon years was becoming inseparable from what John Dean called the “cancer” of Watergate.

Public distrust of government entered into a steepening decline during 1973, although the trend had been gradually downward since 1958, according to the latest survey on the subject by the University of Michigan’s Institute for Social Research. This growing disenchantment with government was found in all socio-economic sectors of American society — most keenly among the college-educated.

“The legacy is clearly one of sustained distrust of virtually all political institutions, especially the electoral

process,” said Warren Miller, director of the institute’s Center for Political Studies.

Faith in the electoral process, Miller and his fellow researchers found, was the one confidence index that held steady through the years. Until 1973.

“Now all of a sudden it seems that the consequences of Watergate has been to bring into question not only the President and presidential government in Washington but the entire efficacy of elections in getting a response from government,” Miller said.

The Michigan sample shows that the percentage of those throughout the U.S. population who felt that elections force the government to heed popular views declined from 56 to 33 per cent.

**D**URING THE YEAR of Watergate those who believe government is run in behalf of a “few big interests” rose from 59 to 72 per cent of the population; those who felt they could trust their government only “some of the time” went from 46 to 66 per cent; those who felt “quite a few of those who run the government are crooked” went up from 38 to 53 per cent.

In Miller’s view the tentative foreign policy triumphs of rapprochement with the Soviet Union and China are transitory in their impact. The endur-

ing theme, as he sees it, is the increasing cynicism of Americans toward governmental processes — a trend that began in the 1960s with a growing polarization of national opinion on such issues as race, welfare policy, public schools and law and order.

Finally, less than two weeks after the release of the Watergate tran-

scripts, the Harris Survey concluded that 49 per cent of the American people wanted President Nixon impeached and removed from office, while 14 per cent did not and 10 per cent were undecided.

Many more, 64 per cent, believed that the President knew about the White House cover-up of Watergate, and 59 per cent believed that Mr. Nixon knowingly falsified his income tax returns.

The wave of public antipathy toward the President seemed to spring from the latent puritanism that still seems to reside in the American conscience and to which he so often appealed.

Richard M. Nixon coveted the presidency and lived within its shadow of influence longer than most men. It was his tragic lot to have brought the office to its lowest level of public esteem since the Harding administration.

Each of our Presidents has left some characteristic imprint — a style, a sense of program, a quality of leadership — that marked his place in the national memory.

Harry S Truman was the embodiment of plain-spoken feistiness. Franklin D. Roosevelt was the consummate political craftsman. John F. Kennedy is remembered for charm and dry, brahmin wit. Dwight D. Eisenhower symbolized soldierly rectitude, and Lyndon B. Johnson a sense of coarse, hard-driving ambition.

Until the Watergate transcripts Mr. Nixon had been remote, almost to the point of personal invisibility. In the White House he alternated between deep seclusion in the Oval Office and

carefully programmed public appearances.

He sought to project himself onto the pages of his autobiography, "Six Crises." But what emerges is a sort of *Kama Sutra* of his emotional reactions to threatening events in physical terms, much as the ancient Hindu manual dealt with the act of love.

"In such periods of intense preparation for battle," he wrote of the Hiss case, "most individuals experience all the physical symptoms of tension — they become edgy and short-tempered, some can't eat, others can't sleep. . . I had a similar experience during the Hiss case. But what I had learned was that feeling this way before a battle was not something to worry about — on the contrary, failing to feel this way would mean that I was not adequately keyed up, mentally and emotionally, for the conflict ahead."

Political process was a series of challenge and crisis which one met, surmounted with an inevitable letdown afterward. But the book fails to project a sense of the underlying beliefs and values which carried President Nixon along his 30-year political career.

And so the question still haunts us at the door of the now-vacated Oval Office in which Richard M. Nixon immersed himself alone for the countless hours of his presidency.

Who was there?

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