

The Nixon Resignation

The resignation of Richard M. Nixon, 37th President of the United States and the first to leave office under threat of impeachment, comes as a tragic climax to the sordid history of misuse of the Presidential office that has been unfolding before the eyes of a shocked American public for the last two years.

Twice elevated to the nation's Chief Magistracy by electoral majorities that viewed him as an exemplar of stern rectitude in public life, Mr. Nixon announced last night his intention to resign following the production of incontrovertible evidence that he had indeed been criminally guilty of obstruction of justice and abuse of the powers of his great office. He has decided to step down from the Presidency only as it has become unmistakably clear within the last few days that the new and additional evidence he made public (after the Supreme Court had ordered him to hand it over to a Federal judge) had insured an overwhelming vote of impeachment in the House of Representatives and his almost certain conviction by the Senate.

Thus Mr. Nixon's act of resignation cannot be said to have been in that honorable tradition of public officials who have abjured office when they felt their honor had been sullied, but with the hope and intention of resuming political power when and if their reputations had been cleared. Mr. Nixon cannot rationally have had such hope. His resignation at this point was to forestall and frustrate the constitutional procedure of impeachment which had begun earlier this year and was steadily moving forward to its inexorable end.

* * *

The forced departure of Richard M. Nixon from the Presidency—for that is what it was even though his resignation is nominally an act of his own volition—is in a larger sense a reaffirmation of the strength of the United States and of the structure of American democracy.

For the events that have been exposed under the generic name of "Watergate," including the disgrace of former Vice President Spiro T. Agnew and culminating in Mr. Nixon's resignation, represented a profound subversion of American democratic institutions, an attempt to seize and consolidate control—not by arms but by the far more effective and penetrating method of subtle accretion of political power in the Executive Office. This is really what was going on at the pinnacle of government, in the White House itself.

Thus, while Mr. Nixon's degradation is a deep personal tragedy and a poignant disappointment for those millions upon millions of Americans who had placed their trust and confidence in him, it is at the same time a triumph for the people of the United States as a whole, whose faith in free and representative government, in the sanctity of the Bill of Rights and of the constitutional system established on this continent nearly two centuries ago, is the bedrock of our political institutions.

Not even the strongest opponents of Mr. Nixon can

rejoice in the tragedy that has befallen him. Certainly we who have been among his most persistent critics take no joy in his personal disaster; but all Americans who maintain their belief in a government of laws rather than of men must be thankful that it has survived this extraordinary trauma in strength and with honor.

* * *

Mr. Nixon's Presidency was surely not without its positive accomplishments, especially in the arena of foreign affairs. This quixotic man, whose political career was founded on virulent opposition not merely to anything that could be made to look like Communism but to any effort to move toward reconciliation of the Western and Communist worlds; was the President under whom the policy of détente with both the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China was pushed further than any other President had dared to go since the Second World War. While the crucial question of limitation of armaments and many other facets of foreign policy are in less than satisfactory condition, the United States is in a generally better relationship with the rest of the world, including our own allies, than when Mr. Nixon assumed office five and a half years ago.

The domestic record, on the contrary, has little to commend it. With inflation the worst in modern times, Mr. Nixon leaves the American economy in a shambles; during his Presidency he clearly had no idea what to do about it. In virtually every other crucial area of domestic life—from race relations to social policy to environmental quality—Mr. Nixon's accomplishments have been largely negative. In terms of public morality, the record of the President and his immediate entourage has, obviously, been abysmal.

But his accomplishments, or his failure of accomplishment, are the least important part of the saga of Richard M. Nixon. What is important is that here was a man who failed his public trust. Never before in American history has there been such a failure at so high a level. This is the sorrow and the tragedy.

Historians and students of human psychology will long ponder Mr. Nixon's mind and motives to try to understand why this intelligent, pragmatic man followed courses of action that produced his own downfall and turned honor to ashes. At the moment, it is clear only that he destroyed himself by senseless acts in an election he could not lose, wasted his opportunities for lasting achievement and ended by consciously and continually deceiving members of his own staff and his most loyal political supporters.

While one can have only pity for Mr. Nixon today, one can have pride in the institutions that have proved strong and resilient enough successfully to surmount the most severe internal crisis and the most insidious internal danger to have threatened this great Republic of ours in more than 100 years.