

HENRY STEELE COMMAGER

LEARNING FROM THE TRAGEDY

Watergate was a tragedy, but not an unmitigated one. Already it is clear that we have learned much from it; we can almost say that we have profited from it. Right now we look back at it with astonishment: How did we ever allow it to happen? In a few years we will look back on it with a certain pride because we did not in fact succumb to what happened, or allow ourselves to be overwhelmed or subverted by it. On the contrary, before the situation got hopelessly out of hand, we rallied our resources, rejected it and reversed it.

Watergate was—I use the term as a symbol—an attempt to subvert the Constitution, but the Constitution survived. It was an attempt by the President to put himself above the law, but in the end it was the law that imposed its magisterial authority upon the President. It was an attempt to nullify important guarantees in the Bill of Rights, but the guarantees survived and helped to keep alive those freedoms that in the end brought down the President. It was an attempt to break down the separation of powers, reduce the Congress to impotence and paralyze the machinery of justice, but the Congress discovered its sense of responsibility, and the courts maintained their independence. It was an attempt to cripple the political processes of our democracy and of our party system, but these recovered and proved themselves resilient and tenacious. It was an attempt to deceive the people through secrecy and fraud, but in the end Lincoln's aphorism about fooling all the people all the time was vindicated.

Thus, once again, as three times in our past when we faced great crises—the attempt by Aaron Burr to steal the election of 1800, the Civil War and the Great Depression—the Constitution and the political processes that it nourished proved themselves tough and enduring. Without disorder, confusion or even excessive bitterness, we have quietly forced Mr. Nixon out of office and quietly installed Mr. Ford. This is a revolution. In most countries of the globe it would be a violent revolution, but in the U.S. it is peaceful and legal. It is indeed constitutional revolution, for just as the founding fathers invented the constitutional convention as a legal method of altering or abolishing government and instituting a new one, they also devised the complex process of impeachment, resignation and succession as a constitutional method of removing a head of state and installing his successor.

Thus at every stage of Watergate and the "Grand Inquest" that followed, we have a vindication of the Constitution and of the political habits that have grown up under it. And this has brought with it a large measure of popular education in constitutionalism, in the meaning of separation of powers, in the central importance of the Bill of Rights and in the validity and resourcefulness of the democratic process. The purpose of impeachment is not only to remove from office a man who has betrayed the public trust. It is also to explore the nature of that public trust, and to make clear what it means to preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the U.S.

Some questions that should have been settled remain, to be sure, unsettled: the question of presidential warmaking, for example, or of the reach of presidential privileges and immunities, or of the balance (if any) between the claims of national security and the guarantees of the Bill of Rights. It is by no means clear, however, that impeachment would have

settled these questions, but it is highly probable that for all practical purposes they have been answered by public opinion. It is wildly improbable that President Ford or his successors in the foreseeable future will wage war on a neutral country, impound congressional appropriations, interfere with the processes of justice, openly flout the guarantees of freedom of speech and of the press or seek to establish a police state—all of which Mr. Nixon did. Impeachment by an informed public opinion has provided guidelines for the future as effective as those that might have emerged from the trauma of an impeachment trial.

The expulsion of Richard Nixon and the repudiation of his impudent claims to privilege, prerogatives and power will have a restorative effect on the whole body politic. It will go far to re-establish that equality and balance of the three departments of Government so central to the thinking of the founding fathers. The process has indeed already begun: the Congress declared its independence in its conduct of the abortive impeachment proceedings; the Court affirmed its independence with a unanimous vote on the validity of presidential subpoenas. We should add that the fourth estate—the press—proudly maintained its independence in the face of almost intolerable pressures, seductions and intimidations.

The removal of Mr. Nixon will go far to restore the integrity of the American political system. Though his whole adult life had been devoted to politics, he seemed to have no appreciation of the delicate and peculiar nature of the system or of the historic role of political parties in maintaining and working it. Instead, he was prepared to corrupt parties, corrupt the CIA, the FBI and the IRS, corrupt his own associates, corrupt the press, deceive the public and buy elections. But it was, in the long run, public outrage at the prostitution of politics for private and partisan purposes that destroyed Mr. Nixon's credibility and forced his resignation. If, in the future, ambitious politicians take this lesson to heart, democracy will function better because of Watergate.

Now that Watergate and Mr. Nixon are behind us, President Ford has set himself to bind up the wounds that they inflicted. With malice toward none, with charity for all, we must cooperate in this honorable task. Then we can return to a consideration of those great issues of domestic and world politics that we have sorely neglected, or allowed to go by default. Not only have the issues been neglected, but Watergate and all that it involved has tended greatly to magnify the importance of domestic as contrasted with global problems. It has, too, magnified purely political issues. These are issues that were in their very nature fortuitous, issues that should never have come up and were in themselves unworthy of the attention of a mature people: corruption, chicanery, mendacity, duplicity, ward politics and private spite.

That Americans tolerated these things for so long is a tribute to their good nature and their laxity; that in the end they saw the larger principles involved in and threatened by these petty issues is a tribute to their sophistication and maturity.

Now, under new leadership, we can turn our attention to those global problems that glare upon us so implacably: the exhaustion of natural resources of energy and of food; the imminent doubling of the world's population in the next half-century; the use and misuse of atomic power, and similar problems. At least we now have a better chance to consider these problems in an atmosphere of non-partisanship than we did while engaged in the elementary though essential task of saving our political and constitutional system. For too long, now, our center of gravity has been Washington. Now we must all realize that our center of gravity is the globe.

Historian Henry Steele Commager is Simpson Professor at Amherst College and the author of some 40 books on the American experience.