

'They Won't Stand for It'

We heard Elliot Richardson, former attorney general, tell a group of reporters at breakfast last week that President Ford had to pardon Richard Nixon to avoid a court trial. The latter was unthinkable, he said: "The country would never stand for it."

We have heard that phrase increasingly in recent years, "The country won't stand for it." Often it comes at the end of a discussion; sometimes sorrowfully, sometimes happily but always conclusively; it wipes out

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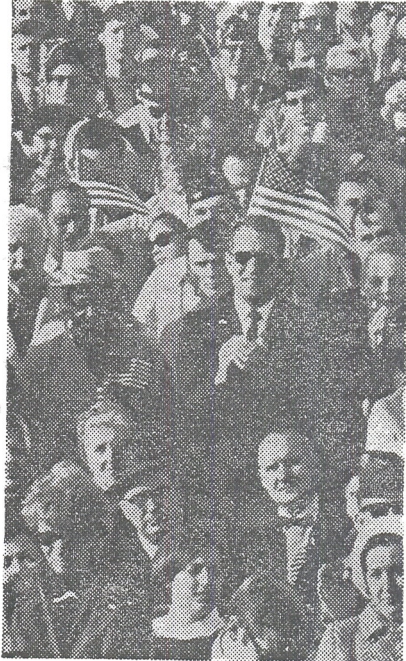
other arguments. It is not what is appropriate, or proper, or even honest, it is advanced as the ultimate the public will tolerate. The speaker always knows just where that invisible line is, the boundary at which it can be said, "The country won't stand for it."

The Vietnam war dragged on and on and 500,000 Americans were committed, but it was impossible to admit that the United States had got in too far, that we could not achieve our announced objectives, and so 40,000 young Americans were lost. No President could come out and simply say, "We made a mistake." The country, of course, would never stand for it.

In 1966 Lyndon Johnson's economists pleaded for a recommendation for higher taxes. The immense expenses of Vietnam plus the bountiful welfare expenditures were producing big deficits and would inevitably drive the already started inflation higher. But Mr. Johnson delayed offering such unpopular proposals to Congress. He explained his reasons patiently to the economists; the country, he said, would never stand for it.

The inflation begun in Johnson's day, stimulated by global food and fuel shortages and world exchange difficulties, has whipped into a great storm. Nearly everybody thinks that somebody else should make sacrifices—taxes equalized, price supports reduced, the ship lightened. And the safety stations manned. But these things are drastic; the storm may abate. And besides, the country of course wouldn't stand for them.

Former Vice President Spiro Agnew was caught in derelictions but pleabargained his way to leniency by resignation and a statement tantamount to an admission of guilt. He couldn't be tried, officials explained, because of course the country wouldn't stand for it.



Watergate burst on the nation and students searched for the guidance of the Founding Fathers. Impeachment—goodness no!—said the wise men in Washington who held off the idea for over a year because they knew the country wouldn't stand for it.

The Watergate grand jury wanted to indict Mr. Nixon along with other defendants but the team of the prosecuting attorneys was appalled. They knew what the country would stand for so Mr. Nixon was made an unindicted co-conspirator.

Now comes the pardon. The presidency sets men apart . . . justice is equal, but more equal to some than to others. From the heights of his sudden power Mr. Ford must feel a peculiar compassion for the man who so recently preceded him, who made him Vice President, who is now so humbled. Besides that, he would spare the nation further trauma; supporters call a trial out of the question, the public would never stand for it.

Oh, men of little faith! The country has stood like a rock through a series of the most trying vicissitudes of modern times—what a spectacle of faith: men have differed passionately but have not faltered. If confidence in laws, justice and Constitution is weakened now, it is not by default of the people; it is due to the leaders who underestimated the people, who were always so confident that they knew what the country would stand for.