

Part 101 24/73

Assessing the Damage

One seeks a moment of repose in which to reflect on the savage events that Richard Nixon has wrought—but there is none. Instead, each day's astonishment is superseded by that of the next, so that there is neither the time nor tranquillity required to appraise the meaning of the unprecedented series of shocks to which the public has been treated. Vice President Agnew convicted of a felony and forced to resign as part of a plea bargaining deal with Mr. Nixon's agents at Justice? Well, that was almost two weeks ago (the "past" with which Mr. Nixon accuses us all of being "obsessed"), and besides he isn't Vice President any more—no one is. Nor, for that matter is Mr. Agnew's principal antagonist, Elliot Richardson, any longer Attorney General: the latest purge has seen to that. We expect we are speaking for more than instant observers, editorialists and assorted double-domes when we take note of the pushed and pressured condition in which people find themselves and of the genuine anxiety that is thus compounded about what is going on in the U.S. government.

How then are we to take a measure of the state to which Mr. Nixon has brought the institutions over which he was elected to preside? As is often the case in a maelstrom of confusing and dramatic events, one can begin the search for lost perspective by repairing to simple indisputable fact—to the homely statistic. Five years ago, in campaigning for office, Mr. Nixon pledged, as some sort of symbolic earnest of his intention to maintain a government of laws, that if elected he would give the nation "a new attorney general." In a particular sense he has been better than his word: he has given the nation three. One was indicted, one was forced out of office owing to his close association with principal Watergate defendants, and one resigned in protest over the President's conduct of the Watergate investigation. Mr. Richardson, the last of these and a man whose integrity is demonstrable, had the "fringe benefit" upon leaving office of finding his Justice Department quarters surrounded by FBI agents, there at White House order to prevent the heisting of any material to which Mr. Richardson was not entitled. The condition of Washington on Saturday night, as George F. Will remarked in a television commentary, sounded like "downtown Santiago."

From this record of events it is not difficult to proceed to a couple of obvious conclusions. One is that Richard Nixon has placed his own personal will and interest between the organs of government and the orderly and lawful pursuit of the public's business. ("Your commander-in-chief has given you an order," Gen. Alexander Haig is reported to have told former Deputy Attorney General William Ruckelshaus in seeking to get him to fire Archibald Cox—as if the military command had a special and overriding relevance to the conduct of civilian business in American life.) A second conclusion is that Mr. Nixon has so disrupted the processes of stable government as to render wholly incredible government's word on any given subject. This is not merely a matter of raising public doubt about the veracity of this or that

official pronouncement or of creating public disillusionment with the verbal crime-fighting of men who themselves turn out to have been systematically breaking the law. Rather, it goes to the heart of people's dealings with the leaders to whom they have entrusted so much power and to their perception of its fairness and the worthiness of its claim to be respected and obeyed.

The convulsion at the Department of Justice again offers an illuminating insight. What *exactly* is to come of cases initiated under the aegis of the special prosecutor and now shifted to other jurisdiction? How serious was the federal government in authorizing those cases at all? When should a citizen take at face value his government's announced intentions? Are criminal prosecutions, like domestic programs and firmly stated policies on any number of other matters, to be changed at whim, summarily revoked, discredited in a midnight communique?

Through the long and anguished night of the phased American military disengagement from Vietnam, Mr. Nixon again and again assured us that his principal consideration in the manner of our withdrawal was that we must not demonstrate in our relationship to the South Vietnamese that the American government's word was anything less than solid. To do so, he suggested, would be to signal allies and adversaries alike all over the world that we were incapable of fulfilling a commitment solemnly undertaken by the U.S. government. Does that concern *begin* at the water's edge? Or is the American public not at least equally entitled to be able to believe in the good faith of what its elected government tells it?

Richard Nixon was elected to his first term in 1968 on a pledge that his would be, uniquely, a government of law and order, and it was said repeatedly in his behalf that he was especially fit to assume office in the face of the civil disorders that marked the late 1960s because, as the saying went, he "could govern." Latterly, the President himself has made a good deal of this implied, if somewhat implausible, attribute, arguing that we as a nation must cease "wallowing" in the evidence of his government's unprecedented misdeeds so that he can get back to the act of—what else?—governing.

Surely the argument, like so much else about these times, is novel. For what we are seeing in the chaos that Mr. Nixon has created is precisely a failure of government. It is not, as the President seems to think we will believe, evidence of anything else. It is not evidence of some unrelated phenomena that is diverting public attention from the "public's business" or undermining his capacity to preside over the federal establishment, to direct the nation's energies into sound channels, to carry out policies upon which there is general agreement and for which there is authority in law. Mr. Nixon can no longer require of us that we ignore the sorry state to which he has brought our affairs in order that he may "govern." His actions over the weekend were those of a man who scarcely seems to understand the meaning of the word.