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A Paraplegic Presidency

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To continue to believe that President Nixon was wholly innocent of any involvement in the Watergate cover-up requires, by this time, a major act of faith. Mr. Nixon is not the sort of man who inspires major acts of faith.

John Dean III, in the week that was, resembled a small, quietly competent spider, weaving his web slowly, inexorably, around his far larger victim. It was useless to remind oneself that spiders are not nice insects, and that squealers are not nice people. Dean's seemingly total lack of human qualities—that soporific, gravel-voiced monotone, that blandly meaningless face—made the spider's performance all the more convincing.

If Dean was lying, his lie was the most complex, the most detailed, the most carefully prepared, in the long

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history of lies since Ananias. A heroic effort to keep an open mind remains necessary, but if the pro-Nixon witnesses, or Mr. Nixon himself, can extricate the President from the web John Dean has woven, it will be a miracle.

The miracle will be all the more miraculous because we have had a preview of the President's defense, in the long, pettyfogging memorandum sent the Ervin committee by White House counsel J. Fred Buzhardt. If the Buzhardt memorandum is the President's best defense, then the President has no defense.

Suppose, then, that the President is stuck in the web woven by spider Dean. Suppose that most of the Congress and most of the country become convinced that the President was guilty of obstruction of justice, which is a felony, a major criminal act. What then? Bar an act of God, there seem to be three possible answers.

The first and most likely answer is that Mr. Nixon will "tough it out," a favorite White House phrase, that he will remain in the White House until Jan. 20, 1977. This is a way of saying that the country will probably be presided over for the next three years and more by a paraplegic President.

The presidential paralysis is evident

already in several ways. As the Cambodia votes in the House indicate, he can no longer count on the conservative coalition that was his basic constituency on Capitol Hill. From now on, any White House proposal is likely to be fought on the Hill just because it comes from the White House.

The President no longer fully controls even his own White House turf. With the appointments of Elliot Richardson and Archibald Cox, the President has in effect abdicated control of the Justice Department, an essential instrument of Presidential power. Back to Woodrow Wilson and beyond, the No. 2 man in the White House has always been totally the President's man. Melvin Laird is his own man, not the President's.

Unless the miracle of extrication can be achieved, the Presidential paralysis will spread as the President's prestige and popularity sink. By some, the entire presidency be reduced and regarded as a Good Thing, on the theory that it is past time that the power of the Presidency be reduced and the power of Congress restored. In fact, the brief periods of congressional domination have been sad and futile, from the Reconstruction era on. The reason is simple. It is not possible for a committee of 535, or even a committee of 100, to run a big country sensibly.

The breakup of the inner Nixon administration, which has already occurred, was certainly a Good Thing, and its goodness becomes clearer with every day of testimony. The picture of the inner administration that emerges from the testimony of Dean, Magruder

and company is a picture of a nest of vipers—and incompetent, paranoiac vipers at that. The vipers were blandly willing to use any federal instrument of power, including the taxing power, to "screw our political enemies," in John Dean's elegant phrase. It was essential to clear the vipers' nest out of the White House.

The vipers exuded a genuine Fascist smell. But presidential paraplegia probably involves more real danger of an American form of Fascism than any nest of vipers. To judge from the Italian and German precedents, the prime preconditions for authoritarian government are the paralysis of government authority, economic crisis and the erosion of confidence in national institu-

tions. All three conditions seem all too likely to be met.

This is why the prospect of a paraplegic presidency is so frightening. An obvious alternative—impeachment—is almost as frightening, and maybe more so. An attempt to impeach the President could tear this country apart like no event since the Civil War, and the disaster would be multiplied if the attempt failed to gain the necessary two thirds vote in the Senate.

This is one reason why impeachment still seems highly unlikely. There is another. The Democrats are quite aware that there would be no political advantage to them in making Vice President Agnew the incumbent President and President Nixon a martyr to millions. Yet it must be added that there is beginning to be serious impeachment talk on Capitol Hill.

There is a third way out—the resignation of the President. Resignation is probably as unlikely as impeachment. The "I'm not a quitter" syndrome is deeply a part of the presidential psyche, right back to his days as an animated punching bag on the Whittier College football team. There is also a practical reason why the President seems unlikely to resign.

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If President Nixon were to cease to be President, he would become plain Citizen Nixon, theoretically as liable to a summons or a subpoena or even an indictment for felony as any Citizen Smith. As the testimony has made obvious, Mr. Nixon sees himself as a man surrounded by enemies, and he may also see the White House as a necessary fortress to protect him from those enemies.

Resignation is not to be ruled out completely all the same. The President no doubt meant what he seemed to mean when he told his daughter Julie: "I want to do what is good for the country—if resigning would be good for the country, well..." There are those who will never believe it, but Mr. Nixon sees himself, and has always seen himself, as a deeply patriotic man.

The time could come when it will be

obvious to him and to everyone else— including the grand panjandrums of the Republican Party—that “resigning would be good for the country.” Indeed, if one considers the three alternatives, it seems clear already that the President’s resignation is the only tolerable way out of the tragic mess in which this country finds itself. But three years and more of a paraplegic presidency seems a far more likely prospect. It is a frightening prospect.