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Crisis of Confidence

When President Nixon addressed the nation last week he appeared painfully aware how tenuous had become the confidence of the American people in their leadership. Repeating his promise to end the war, he recalled the many earlier occasions of similar assurances and asked, almost wistfully, "But can you believe this?"

The crisis of confidence cannot be blamed on any one cause, not even the war, nor on any one person, party or administration. It is an inevitable consequence of the failure of leadership to speak the truth to the American people however distasteful that truth may be. Governmental courage and candor have tended in recent years to give way to poll-dominated image-building and to the sugar-coating of unpleasant realities.

Retreats are interpreted as victories, as in the most recent experience in Laos. An abortive foray into a deserted prisoner-of-war camp is hailed as a logistical triumph. The court-martial of a Lieutenant Calley is instantly reassessed as a political rather than a legal and moral issue. The Bureau of Labor Statistics is suddenly stopped from explaining its data when such an analysis might remind the American public that all is not well with the economy.

These and many other exercises in deception—some petty, some gigantic—tell much about the leadership's estimate of the character and stamina of the American people. One wonders what would have happened to the Allied cause in World War II had Winston Churchill taken so dim a view of the British people's will to face adversity. Would President de Gaulle have extricated France from its disastrous involvement in Algiers had he felt that Frenchmen could not be made to face up to a harsh blow to the national pride?

In a more confident past, American ideals were trusted to gain admiration and acceptance on the strength of their own values. Today, no longer buoyed by that original faith in the contagion of a better and more just society, American politicians are infecting the nation instead with a missionary obsession to support any move that seems to stand for the American way of international law and order. Such crusading fervor always breeds an erroneous belief in the omnipotence of self-righteous goals, and intolerance of those equally patriotic Americans who may disagree with either the goals themselves or the way to achieve them. This is the antithesis of an earlier, humbler faith that a free society has its own inner strength that will gain adherents of its own accord.

The most alarming symptom of today's malaise is the nation's loss of confidence in itself. What has happened to the American faith in freedom when the government appears convinced that its security depends on an elaborate apparatus of internal political surveillance ominously reminiscent of secret police systems? Far less significant than the actual or potential abuse of such governmental powers is the damage done to the American self-image and to the mutual trust between government and people, between citizens and neighbors.

There is nothing new and remarkable in the fact that radicals of the right and of the left share a deep contempt for the institutions of a free society. But today such contempt—born of a lack of confidence—has begun to spread to the vital center. When leadership shows little confidence in the maturity and strength of the people, a nation loses confidence in its government and ultimately in itself.