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After the Coup, Restoring the Trust

By Malcolm Moos

NOTRE DAME, Ind.—On Jan. 18, 1961, promptly at 10:29 A.M., Sterling Green of The Associated Press said: "Thank you, Mr. President," and instantly, amidst a standing ovation from 309 journalists, Dwight David Eisenhower, thirty-fourth President of the United States, waved good-by as he concluded his 193d news conference—his last.

Just the evening before, President Eisenhower had delivered a farewell broadcast. In it he spoke of "the conjunction of an immense military establishment and a large arms industry," which, he pointed out wisely, was new in the American experience. "The total influence," he said, "economic, political, and even spiritual is felt in every city, every state house, every office of the Federal Government." And then he admonished the nation solemnly:

"In the councils of Government, we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex. We must never let the weight of this combination endanger our liberties or democratic processes. We should take nothing for granted. Only an alert and knowledgeable citizenry can compel the proper meshing of the huge industrial and military machinery of defense with our peaceful methods and goals so that security and liberty may prosper together."

Although within three months Mr. Eisenhower's farewell address began attracting national and international scrutiny, only one reporter, William McGaffin of The Chicago Daily News, referred to it at the last news conference.

"Mr. President," he said, "you sounded a warning last night of the dangers to our democratic processes implicit in unparalleled military establishment. But some of your critics contend that liberty, the people's right to know, has suffered under your Administration because you have tolerated abuse of executive privilege in the Defense Department and other departments and agencies and because you did not hold frequent enough press conferences." To which Eisenhower responded briskly, "Well, they are critics and they have the right to criticize."

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And so they do. And so the conflict between the need to know and the right not to tell in the highest councils of Government has become the specter that haunts every headline. Hanging over all of us like the deadliest of all mists is not disillusion, not despair, not disenchantment, not even distrust —but disbelief.

The theme that I am addressing myself to is that of leadership and the need for visibility. I say visibility, although accountability is a much more fashionable word. But I would be the first to insist that accountability is really what is uppermost in our thoughts when we think critically about life at the top.

Over the years we have hesitated to tinker with the Presidential system, and wisely so, for it has served us well as we have moved, crisis by crisis. But without tampering with structure, the times demand adventurous adaptation to the challenges of the hour. It is curious that while there is a movement toward openness at all other governmental levels and in higher education, that we hear so much of "executive privilege" and that the executive branch appears to be moving toward increasing levels of secrecy. It is also curious that during this same time of openness, the Presidency appears to be less visible and less available, shielded from public contact by layers and layers of bureaucracy until the cocoon is no longer transparent.

It is proper for the President to speak to the American people and use them as a megaphone to react upon the Congress, but I believe that the time has come in the confluence of events when the chief executive should speak to the Congress openly and regularly.

The time has come to institutionalize a means of restoring the tidemarks of trust between the executive and Congress. In essence, I suggest the functional equivalent of a vote of confidence for having the President continuously accountable to the legislative branch.

All eyes are trained on the exposé of abuses astride life at the top of our Government. As the McCarthy period taught us, there is no time when charges should be loosely made. Consequently, I hasten to point out that convictions already obtained and acts already admitted to support the statement I have just made. As though that were not bad enough, the allegations which are yet to be examined in Congressional inquiries and in the courts are striking in their enormity.

It must be faced that the sum of all the allegations is that we were the victims of a coup d'état or an attempted coup. I weigh my words carefully. I am aware that the strict definition of a coup d'état is "a sudden decisive exercise of force whereby the existing government is subverted." But, surely, an attempt to capture or retain control of a government by illegal means is action of the same genre.

Malcolm Moos, president of the University of Minnesota, made these remarks as commencement speaker at the University of Notre Dame.