

Tom Braden

Where Is the Nation's Outrage?

John Gardner remarked the other day that one of the post-Watergate problems was the problem of staying angry enough to do something about it. It is a useful reminder. No major reform in our history has ever been accomplished without anger.

Our own revolution, for example, began with the angry cry, "No taxation without representation," and much of the Declaration of Independence is an angry, sweeping accusation of the king.

During the Jacksonian era hundreds of thousands of angry Westerners democratized the federal system.

Slavery was put down in anger. "Trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored" pretty well summed how most Northerners felt about the issue, no matter what scholars say about the economic causes of the Civil War. The reforms which followed the Great Depression—Social Security and insured savings accounts, for example — were eminently logical in themselves, but they might not have been enacted without anger.

So it's a useful weapon, societal anger. But if you read the newspaper editorials, the letters to the editor and the syndicated columnists, you get the impression that the American people

"You get the impression that the people are not very angry about Watergate."

are not very angry about the first systematic attempt in history to undermine their judicial process, defy the constitutional powers of their Congress, trample on their First and Fourth amendments, manipulate their system to punish "enemies" and reward friends—in sum, to destroy their form of government.

One wonders why. Is it because, as Gardner suggests, there is a "frighteningly large" number of people who don't pay attention to their form of government and presumably won't do so until some larger-than-life H. R. Haldeman throws them in jail for not being positively "loyal"?

Or is there an element of embarrassment at work? Are we somewhat ashamed at our own lack of vigilance and inclined, therefore, to go along with the President and let the thing go to the courts, where the President can't be asked any more questions which might further embarrass him—and us?

Maybe it's because Watergate did not frighten us enough. The system exposed it, everybody is saying, and that's true if you can call an alert guard, a couple of good reporters and a courageous newspaper publisher a "system." Do such fortuitous circumstances really prove that it can't happen here?

One more possibility—maybe a lot of Americans secretly admire tricks and deceit by the powerful so long as they consider themselves on the side of the powerful. Mr. Nixon's argument that violations of law by protesters during the 1960s explain and even partially excuse violations of law by representatives of his "new majority" during the 1970s has a faintly familiar ring. Remember the Nazi argument that violations of the German constitution were necessary because the Communists had previously behaved so badly?

I don't know which of these possible explanations for our lack of wrath makes sense. It seems to me that if Americans any longer had much capacity for anger, the nation would have risen in one loud jeer at Mr. Nixon's clinching argument in his Aug. 15 televised speech: "If you want the mandate you gave this administration to be carried out—then I ask for your help to ensure that those who would exploit Watergate in order to keep us from doing what we were elected to do will not succeed."

"Exploit Watergate"? There he goes, questioning everybody's motives again. What does he mean? That trying to discover what his administration has done to the country—and trying to discover it against every obstacle he can raise—is unwarranted and unfair?

In Andrew Johnson's day that remark would have been called "effrontery." And Andrew Johnson was summoned before the House for less than effrontery, and for a great deal less than the high crimes Mr. Nixon's men have committed.

But nobody gets mad any more. What's matter with us? Are we tired, or old?

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