

Mr. Nixon's Last 1,000 Days

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Among many who long at the beginning of the New Year for a new Government and a new spirit in America, there is still a reluctance to call for the resignation or impeachment of the President, something that holds them back, probably some fear that somehow this would weaken the Presidency and harm the nation.

There is something to this notion, but not much. The President is not the Government. The security and continuity of the Republic do not rest on any one man, not even on a Lincoln let alone a Nixon. The system is strong and resilient, and could not only survive Mr. Nixon's departure but might even endure his presence for three more years.

But if he were to go quietly, the Administration would remain in place with the Congress and the courts, the market would probably jump up after a startled hiccup, and a grateful nation would rally around the new President as it did after the deaths of Presidents Roosevelt and Kennedy.

The popular argument for tolerating three more years of Mr. Nixon is that his achievements in the field of foreign affairs, particularly with the Soviets and the Chinese, might be lost if he resigned, and that Vice President Ford is not as experienced in the foreign arena as Mr. Nixon, which is obviously true.

But if the American people sometimes confuse the power of America with the personality or character of the President, foreign governments do not. The danger now is not that powerful foreign governments might try to take advantage of a new President but that they might try to take advantage of a distrusted President presiding over a divided America.

Also, in the next three years, the critical foreign questions are not likely to depend on Mr. Nixon's personal relations with Leonid Brezhnev or Chou En-lai but on U.S. relations with Western Europe, Japan and the Middle East, where Mr. Nixon's achievements in the last five years have not been spectacular.

These are the coming areas. In strategic terms, the Middle East is the key. It is the fundamental political question in the world, for the oil blockade, protected by Soviet power, threatens the industrial security of Europe, Japan and, in a more limited sense, of the United States.

But the American answer to these questions depends more on a united nation than on Mr. Nixon. Already, the informing mind in all these diplomatic tangles is not the President's but Mr. Kissinger's, and while all the courtesies of Presidential power are

respected, the foreign embassies in Washington and their governments are more concerned about the internal unity of America than about anything else.

Another popular argument against the resignation of the President is that it might set a bad precedent and hurt the institution of the Presidency. But why?

Nothing is likely to hurt the Presidency more than tolerating a man who has been unfaithful to the spirit of the Constitution, who has put a gang of twisters and moral cripples in high office, and lost the trust of the people.

This trust is the first article in the political contract and essential to the moral authority of the Presidency. The question is not what Mr. Nixon's mandate was in the last election, but what it is now. Once a President has lost the confidence of the electorate, resignation is not a bad but a good precedent, and if it were established by any party that a President could be called on by its leaders to resign, future Presidents might be more careful about fiddling with the freedom of the people.

After all, resignation or dismissal is what happens in all other American institutions or parliamentary democracies when the chief executive fails. They don't ask whether he meant to fail, or hire burglars, or turn over his authority to dunderheads or crooks, but merely whether he presided over the disaster, and if so, they get themselves a new chief executive officer, coach, or prime minister.

Maybe the silliest argument against the resignation of Mr. Nixon is that it would hurt the Republican party. Quite the opposite is the case. Nothing could hurt it more than to keep him in place for three long years at the center of an endless controversy over Watergate and all its related horrors.

This is a political nightmare, whereas the alternative gives the Democrats the shakes. With Mr. Ford in the White House, backed by a Rockefeller or an Elliot Richardson as Vice President, all the intractable policy problems would of course remain, but the poisonous atmosphere of the country would be swept away, and the chances of a Republican victory in 1976 infinitely improved.

In human terms, it is easy to understand the reluctance of the people to insist on resignation or impeachment. They have too many regrets. It seems too cruel and humiliating, and would obviously be bad for Richard Nixon; but to argue that it would be bad for America in Mr. Nixon's last thousand days is palpable nonsense.