

Must Nixon's Hard Core Supporters Be Satisfied?

No matter how much damaging evidence is unearthed against Richard Nixon, no matter how many of his key associates are convicted and imprisoned, a steady one-quarter of all Americans continue to support the President. The persistence with which this hard core holds to its opinion through a succession of testimony, transcripts and trials that have disturbed almost everybody else says something about true believing, and about the ability to ignore or reject evidence to the contrary. And it raises the question, as the House debate on impeachment draws near, of whether this sizable segment of opinion represents a danger to the public tranquillity if its views do not prevail.

The President's highest point of popularity, 68% in the Gallup poll, was last reached after the Viet Nam peace settlement in January 1973. Fourteen months later, in the wreckage of Watergate, the number of Americans who thought the President was doing a good job had dropped to 25%, and there it has hovered ever since. Can many in this 25% even be following the news?

The real question in recent months has not been whether the President has been guilty of low conduct in office; that point has been well established. Among those who once greatly admired Nixon but no longer think he is doing a good job, the question now is whether the bad of his Administration outweighs the good and whether impeachment would be more unsettling than letting a wounded President serve out his term.

But among the bedrock 25%, such questions do not seem to matter; their view of Nixon remains immovable. Some in this group take their cue from the Administration and consider Watergate a "blip" that has been overblown by a hostile press. Others are more cynical (though they would probably describe their attitude as realistic) and deride their opponents as hypocrites. To them, politics is always dirty, and Nixon's conduct in office only slightly worse than usual, if that. Furthermore, many Nixon backers consider him a man who sees and understands their interests, particularly in areas like school busing, welfare programs and defense spending.

More interesting, though harder to get at, are those who are anything but cynical in supporting the President. Pollsters identify them generally as people who are older, less well-schooled, conservative and more than likely Southern. The question is whether many of them are for the President or for the presidency—like monarchists, identifying the ruler with the country. Charles W. Colson, in a memo about opinion-

manipulating, quoted a pollster's theory that "50% of the American people at least will always believe what any President tells them because they want to believe what any President tells them." The percentage who do today has shrunk in half. But can it be that Nixon's most recent low of 24% suggests a permanent core of people who believe in "my President, right or wrong"?

This can be a reasoned conclusion, but often it is a more elemental, emotional response. It is to be found among many men and women for whom life is a hard and marginal struggle, who care little about current events. They are not to be despised; their loyalty and sense of duty is such that they faithfully serve, or send their sons off to fight in wars they do not necessarily understand. Such unthinking patriotism is generally considered a right-wing manifestation, though right-wing is too political a term for so apolitical an attitude. Still, the passive patriot when aroused is a person to be feared: in troubled times—having earlier ignored the flow of political argument—he stirs to the noisy rhetoric of demagogues. Joe McCarthy and George Wallace have known how to rouse him.

Few politicians are more keenly aware of the existence of this category of Americans than Richard Nixon. During the long Viet Nam negotiations, Henry Kissinger, in his private explanations of Nixon's policy, always stressed the President's fear of a future backlash among such voters if they came to believe that the peace settlement was dishonorable. Many Republican politicians similarly fear that if Nixon's guilt is not firmly established, he will become a martyr (with disastrous political consequences for years to come).

Nixon may hope to achieve such martyrdom by resigning after the House vote, sparing the country and himself a Senate trial. But some Congressmen argue that if a condition of his leaving office is that he publicly acknowledge—and not contest—the case against him, Nixon will disappear from the scene as thoroughly as has Spiro Agnew.

But how much attention must be paid to fears of backlash or martyrdom? For the sake of the public temper, how universally approved must any major political decision be? The questions matter because the well-being of society depends on more than democracy's numbers and nose counts.

The democratic idea of the rule of the majority, though practiced for a time in ancient Athens, has gained wide acceptance only relatively late in the day. In medieval times, whether in the great council of the church or in secular parliament, the assent of everybody was esteemed as the ideal. "Unanimity was sought," wrote J. Roland Pennock in the *American Political Science Review*, "even if it could be obtained only by the process of wearing down and shouting down the dissenters—or by resort to threats or physical force."

Gradually the notion of majority rule developed, and got its philosophical

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NIXON SUPPORTER IN MICHIGAN

sanction from John Locke, who greatly influenced the founding fathers. Alexander Hamilton warned that if "a pertinacious minority can control the opinion of a majority . . . the sense of the smaller number will overrule that of the greater." Though Thomas Jefferson could proclaim in his first Inaugural Address that "the minority possess their equal rights," he called it a "sacred principle" that "the will of the majority is in all cases to prevail." That being so, what is so equal about minority rights?

Cobden put the argument at its sunniest: "If the minority are discontented with the existing state of things, let them set to work and exert themselves until

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they become the majority." Fine, unless a minority is of a different race, religion or culture, and has no hope of becoming a majority. Then there must either be continual friction, as in Northern Ireland or Cyprus, or else a guarantee of protected minority rights that a majority cannot overturn. John C. Calhoun believed the South to be such a permanent minority in need of protection. So he argued for a "concurrent majority" by which Government "regards interests as well as numbers," takes "the sense of each," and arrives at a solution acceptable to all. This process involved a kind of minority veto that led first to nullification and then to the tragedy of secession and civil war. In fact, the South is not a permanent minority; it has understood how to coalesce with other groups and, by using seniority in Congress, to frustrate the will of the majority.

Those who fear the rule of King Mob often complain of "the tyranny of the majority" and even romantically assert, as did one of Ibsen's characters in *An Enemy of the People*, that "the minority is always in the right." Lone voices crying in the wilderness often do speak good sense, and majorities can of course be wrong, or infuriatingly slow to come round to a view that is later seen to be right. But after examining all the arguments for the assumed tyranny of the majority, Ferdinand A. Hermens, professor emeritus of the University of Cologne, concluded that "whenever real tyranny exists it is exercised by a minority." The men of Philadelphia greatly feared gusts of passion in momentary majorities and embedded all kinds of checks and balances in the Constitution to avert them. In as grave a matter as convicting an impeached President, they required a two-thirds Senate majority. Beyond that, how far can a democracy go in conciliating a minority view without rendering itself impotent?

Politicians instinctively recoil from alienating any sizable segment of opinion, which is one reason—apart from the dilatory tactics of the White House—why Watergate and impeachment have taken so long to come to resolution. The arguments of the hard-core Nixonites have been heard and debated at great length. That is the true right of a minority, and it is being fully satisfied. There is no denying that if the minority loses once the issue is put to the test, it will still find the decision hard to accept. But the rights of a minority do not include having others defer to them out of a fear of backlash from their displeasure; backlash is not an argument to be met, but only a conjecture, a caution and a threat. The majority, too, has rights and if, after all the debating and deciding, the trial and the defense, the majority's own sense of the rightness of its case were to be frustrated, that would lead to an even greater backlash and disturbance of the peace. ■ Thomas Griffith