The President Needs Our Help Because We Need His

The following editorial appears in the June issue of FORTUNE, published today. It is reprinted here because FORTUNE's editors feel it has an urgent message for all Americans. For additional copies, write to: FORTUNE, 1717, Time & Life Bldg., Rockefeller Center, New York 10020.

Six weeks ago this was a divided, frustrated, and anxiety-ridden country. Some people said, "Things have to get better because they can't get worse." Then, within a few days, the American situation deteriorated from serious to critical. Cambodia, Kent State, the killings of blacks in Georgia and Mississippi, along with all the protests, counterprotests, and counter-counterprotests that stemmed from these, plunged the nation to a level of bewilderment and fear that it had not reached in the depth of the great depression.

A measure of the present crisis was the last-minute refusal of the Illinois Constitutional Convention to let John W. Gardner make a long-scheduled speech. Gardner, a Republican who had served a Democratic President as Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare, is one of the most patiently reasonable figures in public life. The Illinois convention, stirred up by its own passionate argument over Cambodia, feared the effect of Gardner's warning that "the nation disintegrates." By refusing to listen, the convention, which is not composed of excitable students or nervous guardsmen, demonstrated that the nation was indeed disintegrating.

For the first time, it is no longer possible to take for granted that the U.S. will somehow survive the crisis that grips it. The land itself will survive, of course,

On the domestic front, black militancy and white reaction against black gains rose simultaneously. Nixon not only failed to allay this rising discord, but contributed to it. Apparently despairing of conciliating black leaders and their allies in "the liberal establishment," his Administration seemed to court a reputation of being less than evenhanded. By two provocative Supreme Court appointments, by unleashing the Vice President to woo that large number of voters who were disgusted by demonstrations and riots, and by an equivocal statement on school desegregation, Nixon gave the impression—especially to blacks—that he was not really trying to pull the nation together.

It must be conceded that his tactics were within the conventional patterns of U.S. politics. When attacked, politicians are expected to strike back and to seek friends among the enemies of their enemies. But the underlying political situation had degenerated to a point where a conventional maneuver such as Nixon's was unworkable.

Why Cambodia was a mistake

Overshadowing domestic issues was the inherited dilemma of Vietnam. Nixon's contribution to Vietnam policy was defensible. Almost any imaginable man, taking office as President in 1969, would have wanted to end the American military commitment in Vietnam in an orderly way that would minimize the internal and external price of partial failure. A very wide band of public opinion, believing that Nixon meant what he said, supported his stated policy. Many moderates among the antiwar dissidents adopted a wait-

upon nonmaterial values such as those represented by civil rights and the moral aspects of the war in Vietnam.

To knead this new moral concern into some new sense of where the U.S. is going calls for a transformation in the style of presidential leadership. Through most of our history, Congress was the most important federal organ in a nation where the central political task was the resolution of conflicts between regions and economic-interest groups. The challenge of the great depression, overshadowing such conflicts, ushered in forty years of presidential ascendancy. World War II, the cold war, and the prosperity that everybody wanted had confirmed the tendency to think of the policy-making power as concentrated in the White House, where national unity is symbolized.

That era has ended. In a room full of students watching Nixon's May 8 televised press conference, a girl said, "He speaks as if it's his country; it's our country, too." It is, indeed, and it is also the country of the flag-waving construction workers, the enraged blacks, and a hundred other factions whose viewpoints and demands will be harder to compromise than the traditional issues of economic rivalry.

The role of Congress, that instrument of government intended to represent the people in the multiplicity of their political wills, is now more necessary than it ever was. Nixon has been—or has seemed to be—too isolated. Part of the shock of his Cambodian decision came from the public's sense that neither this specific action nor the whole Southeast Asia policy had been considered and decided on a sufficiently broad and representative base.

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For the first time, it is no longer possible to take for granted that the U.S. will somehow survive the crisis that grips it. The land itself will survive, of course, along with the machines and the people—or most of them. But no nation is merely, or mainly, an aggregate of its geography, its material assets, and its warm bodies. At the core of the U.S., conferring identity, cohesion, and vitality, stands a Proposition: free men, despite differences of status, belief, and interest, can govern themselves. Upon the survival of that Proposition, confirmed by eight generations of superb achievement, depends any worth-while future that an entity called the United States might have. And it is that Proposition—amazingly—which in the spring of 1970 has come to be at stake.

Our two most disruptive specific issues are Vietnam and race. Grave as these are, it is a mistake to believe that the fundamental U.S. political situation would return to "normalcy" if these two issues were

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Nixon should have placed a very high priority on deepening and extending this tentative acceptance of his promise to liquidate the war. Instead, attacks by the Vice President and others on antiwar dissenters revived doubts that his Administration really intended to expedite military withdrawal from Vietnam.

Cambodia pulled the plug. It may ultimately be shown that Nixon had excellent military reasons for sending U.S. units into Cambodia. But Cambodia was not his main problem. The condition of the U.S. was his main problem. When he encased his announcement on Cambodia in the kind of simplistic and emotional language most likely to inflame antiwar dissidents, including the moderates, he invited a greater cost in American unity than could possibly be balanced by

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If Nixon does his part, if he moderates the embattled tone of the Administration, if he shows more of the kind of initiative embodied in his new Family Assistance Act now before Congress, if he agrees that Congress has an important function in foreign and military policy, then a correspondingly heavy responsibility for conciliation will shift to the shoulders of his present critics.

What others can do

Among critics of the war are men who seem to have staked their reputations on the prediction that it must lead to disaster. They should stop speaking as if nothing short of disaster in Vietnam will satisfy them. Among critics of Nixon are some who are likewise committed to his failure. This kind of partisanship will impede the work of reconciliation.

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Our two most disruptive specific issues are Vietnam and race. Grave as these are, it is a mistake to believe that the fundamental U.S. political situation would return to "normalcy" if these two issues were miraculously whisked away. For the internal and external demands on this society have been multiplied by the sheer fact of its unprecedented power and prosperity. The demonstrated American capacity for rapid and radical change stimulates insistence upon other and greater changes. These demands conflict with one another. As the horizon of our choice has widened, we have moved into a new dimension of opportunity that is also—as we can now see—a new dimension of political danger.

There is no prospect whatever that our society can avoid issues, foreign and domestic, on which people will divide sharply. The only long-range hope lies in the possibility that we can improve our processes of discussion and decision to the point where such future challenges will not degenerate into crises like the present one.

There isn't going to be a long range worth bothering about, however, unless we cope immediately with the mess we're in. Improvement of the process has to start now and it has to be visible and quick—before the morale of the U.S., jolted by some unforeseen external or internal event, slides into another sickening descent like that of the last few weeks.

Where the initiative lies

The first and overriding goal of this torn country must be reconciliation. The burden of initiative in reconciling the country falls upon Richard Nixon, not because he is most to blame for the disruption but because he is—God help him—President. Neither his countrymen nor history would forgive the man who was in the White House while the ability of Americans to govern themselves came to an end.

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Now Nixon is faced with a heightened demand that he compensate for the Cambodian mistake by a precipitate withdrawal from Vietnam. If he accedes to that demand, he will risk provoking a different upheaval of U.S. protest as serious as that which greeted his invasion of Cambodia. If, on the other hand, he ignores vociferous dissent and relies on the belief that he has the backing of a "silent majority," he may find that many present supporters will turn against him on the ground that he allowed disruption to reach a point where the political and economic life of the nation has become grievously impaired.

What's the direction?

Reconciliation does not mean attempting to suffuse the U.S. with sweetness and light. Reconciliation does not imply that dissent should cease on the ground that "the President knows best." Nor does it imply that policies, foreign or domestic, should be abandoned whenever they encounter vigorous internal resistance. Either of those paths to reconciliation is inconsistent with the central theory and the best experience of American democracy.

We are going to disagree. Never a homogeneous or conformist people, Americans have down the years achieved unity enough through their shared sense of forward motion, of hope. What now undermines the national confidence and cohesion is not the inevitable recurrence of dissension, but the weakening of belief that the nation is moving, despite its quarrels, in some worth-while direction.

The President of the U.S. has a part to play in restoring a vision of the American future. After continental expansion had been achieved, after U.S. world power had been demonstrated, after economic growth

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What others can do

Among critics of the war are men who seem to have staked their reputations on the prediction that it must lead to disaster. They should stop speaking as if nothing short of disaster in Vietnam will satisfy them. Among critics of Nixon are some who are likewise committed to his failure. This kind of partisanship will impede the work of reconciliation.

Journalism, though not unfairly biased in the way Spiro Agnew says it is, does have a deep-seated and regrettable tendency to prefer the dramatic confrontation between extreme views to the less exciting processes of reasonable discourse and compromise. This preference has been a powerful factor in bringing about a sense of national disintegration—especially since protesters of all sorts have discovered the hunger of the TV screen for visually exciting political expression. Restraint of this appetite could be one of journalism's contributions to reconciliation.

The academic community, organized around value-free science, has been ill-prepared—and left the nation ill-prepared—for a present and future politics turning largely upon the intricacies of how moral values apply to practical policies. Correction of this defect will be a long-range process, but of immediate help would be a modicum of humility that at least recognizes the difficulty of applying purely idealistic criteria to the actual choices *now* before us.

All responsible citizens who may disagree with the President, and each other, on specific acts and policies must recognize the higher national necessity of defending the whole. And resolved into a kind of Committee of the Whole, taking his conciliatory statements at face value, we should give him the fullest possible support in his efforts to contain the fissioning forces of this country.

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In fairness to Nixon it should be remembered that for several years before he took office political passions had been rising. The Eisenhower-Kennedy-Johnson style of conciliatory, centrist politics had collapsed in 1966-67 under pressures of domestic and foreign issues.

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The President of the U.S. has a part to play in restoring a vision of the American future. After continental expansion had been achieved, after U.S. world power had been demonstrated, after economic growth came to be assumed, it was not surprising that Americans, especially the young, should more insistently ask, "What else? What next?" Nor was it either surprising or deplorable that this questioning should turn

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