

A New Reform Era

By WILLIAM V. SHANNON

WASHINGTON, Sept. 14—"To be a healthy nation, a strong nation, we need also restore the health of our government institutions," President Nixon told Congress the other day.

In support of this contention, Mr. Nixon reiterated his call for reorganization of the executive departments, Federal-state revenue sharing and welfare reform. But the crisis of confidence in the nation's institutions which was discussed in a previous article in this space is far wider and more profound. It encompasses the Presidency itself, Congress, the courts, the military and civil bureaucracies, and state and municipal governments.

No single leader can resolve this crisis by himself. Yet the President is a critical figure because he is the only official chosen by the whole people. A way out of the crisis can begin to be found only if there is a President who can focus the nation's moral energies by a politics of idealism and creative conciliation. That has not occurred during Mr. Nixon's Presidency.

Like President Johnson before him, President Nixon has squandered much of his political credit in Vietnam. As he frequently points out, he is gradually eliminating the war as a political issue. But after nearly three additional years of combat, 15,000 American deaths, the Cambodian invasion and the Kent State episode, he has taken so long to do it that he did not benefit from the tolerance that the public extends to every new President. As a result, his base of support is no wider in the fall of 1971 than it was in the fall of 1968.

By the Haynsworth and Carswell nominations, Mr. Nixon damaged the Presidency as well as the Supreme Court. He was seen to be playing regional politics with appointments on which the ordinary citizen had a right

to expect him to be highminded and disinterested.

A successful Presidency involves a dialogue between President and people. Candor is the first requirement of a dialogue. Without it, there can be no mutual trust. The dialogue has to be on a regular and frequent basis. Otherwise, there is no resonance. But Mr. Nixon has chosen to emulate the remote, imperial style of General de Gaulle. That may be suitable for a country with Bonapartist traditions but it is a curious mode for the United States.

Although the Kennedy Administration tried to "manage the news" and the Johnson Administration found its way to "credibility gap," both of those regimes were as open as town meetings compared to the present Administration with its absence of Presidential news conferences, its overt hostility to much of the press and its passion for secrecy.

Having failed to establish a continuing dialogue with press and public, President Nixon has seriously impaired his ability to win broad support for such institutional initiatives as he has attempted—executive reorganization and Federal-state revenue sharing. He first oversold them to a fantastic degree by packaging them as the "second American Revolution" and then naturally found he could not sustain public interest in them at that level.

He then coupled revenue sharing with welfare reform as postponable items in his new economic program. Trying to repair the damage he reasserted his support for them in his address to Congress last week, but major proposals cannot be used as propaganda makeweights and still retain their credibility. Mr. Nixon does not appear to realize that in manipulating them in this fashion, he undercut not only revenue sharing and welfare reform but also public belief in

his own seriousness. Is he trying to reform the Government or is he playing political games?

Yet if Mr. Nixon has failed to restore the Presidency as a center of effective, convincing leadership, other institutions hardly come off any better. Congressmen seem unaware that many citizens see the House and Senate as places where far too many men arrive poor and leave twenty or thirty years later with a lot more than their pensions. Lyndon Johnson with his radio and television franchises set a bad example in this regard, and he is not unique. Until Congress clears up flagrant conflicts of interest and drastically reforms the law on campaign spending, a greasy smog of money will linger over the Capitol.

At least half the state governments are not fit to participate in any Federal revenue-sharing plan because they lack adequate budget and accounting systems and have poorly paid, politically intimidated civil services. To pour money into these governments is like pouring water into a sewer—it can never be traced.

At every level of government and in almost every corner of our common life, there is need for a regeneration of public morality and a rededication to social justice such as swept the nation in the progressive era during the first decade and a half of this century. New organizations like John Gardner's Common Cause and Ralph Nader's Public Citizen and the emergence of public interest law firms and citizen environment groups are evidence that such a movement may be forming. When it finds political expression and leadership at different levels, the renewal of the nation's institutions of Government will begin.

James Reston is on vacation. His column will resume in October.