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A British View Of Watergate

London

THIS IS A TALE of two Englishmen and their reactions to Watergate.

They are Establishment figures in the good sense: well-educated, sensitive to history, exercising influence with a strong sense of responsibility. Family and professional connections both have given them wide acquaintance on the Continent and in the United States. In the past both thought well of President Nixon.



One is a government official, the other a banker. Each is regarded in his field as one of the outstanding men of the generation just reaching power. Their professions are hardly given to overstatement, but they did not try to conceal the strength of their feelings when asked about Watergate.

"What we know this Administration did," the official said, "showed an extraordinary combination of insensitivity, lack of moral scruple and stupidity. What is one to make of a government like that?"

"The contempt it has shown for its own society inevitably raises questions about its attitude in foreign relations.

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"THERE ARE MANY of us," he said, "especially here in Britain, who were brought up to respect the United States—to love it, really—as the leader of the free world. You claimed leadership not just because of your power but because you were a moral nation.

"For years now, since General de Gaulle started it, there has been a new skepticism about American motives and the American government's will or ability to fulfill its promises. My colleagues and I have been holding out against that view, successfully until now. I doubt that we can any more."

Like most of his British colleagues, the official has broadly admired the Nixon foreign policy. But now he thinks it will meet deep skepticism. And even apart from skeptical feelings, the official asked, how can one do serious business with a White House preoccupied by Watergate? Suppose President Nixon makes his planned trip to Europe later this year: it will be regarded by most of the host governments as an unavoidable duty, not a hopeful opportunity to remold Atlantic relationships.

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WHAT THEN CAN CHANGE the situation? The official was asked. He shook his head and said he saw nothing really, short of the President's resignation from office. Otherwise the next three years were going to be very hard in the West: "it is a matter of confidence."

The banker used that same word, confidence, and came to the same conclusion. He spoke more abruptly. His message was simply that he did not believe the dollar could really be stabilized, and with it the whole monetary system, so long as Nixon remained President.

Striking as that view may seem in a British banker, it is not a solitary one here. The monetary commentator of the Financial Times, C. Gordon Tether, wrote the other day:

"The light thrown on the Administration's way of life by the undisputed parts of the testimony given to the Senate inquiry is persuading more and more observers that . . . only clear proof that something akin to a spiritual rebirth is taking place in the presidential office will now suffice to halt the catastrophic decline in confidence in the dollar before it brings the rest of the international monetary house down."

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