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Suggestion of a Banana Republic

This was written before President Nixon's statement on the Watergate affair.

By Peregrine Worsthorne

LONDON—There has not been a major scandal involving the American Presidency since the United States became a great power: not a scandal, that is, which could reasonably be taken to justify the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European assumption that American politics were so inescapably corrupt and dirty as to preclude that country from ever playing a constructive and responsible role in world affairs. Now there is.

The Watergate affair, or rather its aftermath, suggests a standard of values in the White House formerly associated only with the presidential palaces of Latin-American banana republics, by comparison with which the conduct of the Mafia is made to seem positively dignified and salubrious. So far as the British reader is concerned it is a nice contemporary question whether to be more shocked by the daily disclosures of what General Amin's henchmen are getting up to in Kampala or what President Nixon's henchmen are getting up to in Washington.

What is shocking about the Watergate affair is not so much the crime itself, which consisted of Republican party officials breaking into, bugging and rifling Democratic headquarters during last year's election campaign, but the shameless efforts made subsequently by the President himself to prevent these men from being brought to justice and to frustrate the Congressional inquiry from getting to the bottom of this squalid business.

Presumably he thought that the American public did not care, and that not only could he allow crooks on to his staff in the White House but that he could so condition the American people as not to be surprised or shocked at this outrage. On the latter point, at any rate, it is beginning to look as if he was wrong.

Those of us on this side of the Atlantic who have been consistently pro-American in the past decades have every right to be outspoken on this subject. How can the case be made in popular terms for continuing to accept American leadership if the American leaders themselves seem to be falling far below the none-too-high standards demanded of our own public life?

This was always the case, as I say, made by earlier generations of European critics of the American political system in the past. They argued that graft and corruption were endemic in



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that system, which could not be made to work without such abuses on a massive scale. This, they concluded, was why no decent citizens would go into American politics, which was why the United States could never be relied upon in world affairs.

This facile judgment seemed to have been amply disproved in the postwar years, when a succession of Presidents nobly rose to the cold war challenge, not only in terms of public policy but also in terms of private probity. As American power grew, so also did the

reputation of the kind of men attracted to its exercise.

Europe came to respect White House officialdom, which seemed to be developing the kind of *gravitas* and grandeur befitting an imperial power. This is not the impression which the White House gives today, unless empire be associated with Byzantium rather than Rome, or the Ottoman Turk rather than the British Raj.

Nor is this just a case of the present man in the White House. His main Democratic rival, Senator Edward Kennedy, emanates an equally unedifying odor. If the Watergate scandal hangs over Nixon's head, so does the Chappaquiddick scandal hang over Edward Kennedy's. Both leaders, Republican and Democrat, have shown a determined, ruthless, unprincipled contempt for the truth and, what is worse, a conviction that they can easily get away with it.

These things do matter desperately. The power of the White House today is of a truly terrifying magnitude. The President who for so long seemed to be spending his mornings ordering the F.B.I. to fudge issues arising out of the Watergate scandal, displaying all the petty evasiveness of a bank clerk caught with his hand in the till—so as to save the face of the Republican party—is the same President who spent his afternoons ordering the American Air Force to bomb Cambodia in the sacred name of freedom and democracy, claiming executive independence as much to justify the latter act of high international statesmanship as the former act of low political cunning.

It can be argued that such contrasts are inherent in public life. But the contrast today in Washington is becoming excessive, almost obscene. The spectacle of the American President exercising thermonuclear power, like some colossus who bestrides the world, cannot be coupled with the spectacle of a shifty politician covering up his tracks after some shady deal, without the two images becoming blurred into a nightmare combination of unprecedented ugliness.

The Watergate affair suggests that behind the infinitely modern and impressive manifestations of American power and purpose lies a party political system that is about as modern and impressive as a cesspool.

This must be deeply disturbing for the rest of the world. White House power is indivisible, and it is a grim thought that the finger on the thermonuclear trigger should be part of a hand so deeply and shamelessly sunk into so many malodorous political pies.

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