

# The Watergate Tragedy

28 APR  
The plea of Henry A. Kissinger that there be no "orgy of recrimination" in the wake of the Watergate scandal raises some disquieting questions.

Compassion is an admirable quality; but in voicing concern about Watergate's possible damage to the authority of the President and to the worldwide image of the United States as a champion of the democratic process, Mr. Kissinger seems to be transferring guilt from those who instigated Watergate to those who have exposed it.

This topsy-turvy assessment of blame is on a par with the Administration's studied practice—in common with its predecessors—of seeking through all the years of this country's tragic over-involvement in Vietnam to silence critics of that misguided policy on the ground that they were playing into the hands of the enemy and undermining international respect for the United States.

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The reality, which Mr. Kissinger chose to ignore, was that President Nixon exhibited no interest, much less zeal, in insuring full public disclosure of all the facts behind this shabby interference with the rights of his political opposition until men in the inner circle of the Administration began to testify against one another before the grand jury and indictments seemed certain—and major Republican politicians began to express fears for the future of the G.O.P.

Indeed, even now experts on criminal law are publicly expressing reserve about whether the President is seeking to facilitate the inquiry or to obstruct it. Special ambiguity surrounds the significance of Mr. Nixon's assertion last week that immunity from prosecution should not be given to any major officeholder, past or present. On the face of it, that would seem a stern demand for full punishment of anyone implicated in the scandal. But some lawyers note that the Nixon admonition could strip the prosecution of an important tool by shutting the door to promises of immunity as an incentive to testimony—a device the President himself has often advocated to induce witnesses in cases involving organized crime to provide information about higher-ups.

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The other principal area of reserve about the genuineness of the Administration's belated conversion to demanding revelation of all the facts stems from the continued unwillingness of the President to appoint a special prosecutor to supersede those on the regular staff of the Justice Department.

It is no personal reflection on Assistant Attorney General Petersen or on any of his aides to point out that their ability to command total confidence is impaired by all the same considerations that prompted Attorney General Kleindienst to step out of direct contact with the case.

As long ago as last August, long before the scandal had achieved its present dimensions, this newspaper urged Mr. Nixon to designate an independent prosecutor divorced from identification with politics. That course is even more imperative now. In fact, were it not for the admirable insistence of Chief District Judge Sirica on piercing the web of deception spun by the original Watergate defendants, the case never would have got to its present state of semi-exposure.

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Apart from all these factors, there is another element of particular irony in the Kissinger "compassion" plea. It comes from an Administration that has shown exactly the reverse of compassion for the thousands of young Americans who went to jail or into exile because of their opposition to the Vietnam war.

When Mr. Kissinger speaks of "the tragedy that has befallen so many people" involved in Watergate, can he really be insensitive to the tragedy of those who remain without hope for amnesty from this Administration for having broken the law, not in pursuit of political power but in protest against a war they regarded as immoral?

Faith in this country, both at home and abroad, will best be preserved through an unflinching demonstration by the President that a single standard of justice prevails here, with the most powerful as subject to punishment as the weakest—and with the always desirable qualities of compassion and forbearance impartially applied.