

Watergate: What It Takes to 'Tough It Out'

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In a much more precise meaning of the term than Ronald Ziegler had in mind when he sought to nullify his past statements on the Watergate affair a short while back, the government of the United States is rapidly becoming inoperative. We mean no little joke, no sardonic play on words. For if anything has become clear in the onrush of disclosures and events over the past 72 hours, it is that the persons charged with ultimate responsibility for directing this nation's executive branch affairs have become crippled and immobilized and unable fully to carry out their duties. That is because the President is caught in a monstrous web of administration malpractice and corruption and deceit. And what is even more disturbing than the shattering drama being played out in full sight of us all is the fact that evidently Mr. Nixon still has not decided to take those steps which are essential to restoring the dignity of his office and the capacity of his administration to fulfill its constitutional obligations.

The first of these steps is to guarantee that the nation's system of criminal justice, so gravely and thoughtlessly maimed by the cover-ups and complicities of the past 10 months, is finally permitted to work its will without obstruction where criminal actions on the part of Mr. Nixon's colleagues and subordinates are concerned. Work—*really work*. That, as we have said before, means a prosecution which ensures that the guilty will be brought to book and—equally important—that the innocent will be cleared. Can anyone any longer doubt that justice in these crucial respects and the public's faith in it will only have been served when the President takes steps to remove the prosecution from the guidance of those who have (1) had various degrees of responsibility for the failures of investigation so far and (2) stood in close personal and professional relationships to the men under investigation?

On Thursday the prestigious Association of the Bar of the City of New York asked Mr. Nixon to remove the criminal investigation from the jurisdiction of Assistant Attorney General Henry Petersen and to appoint a special prosecutor in his place. We also renew our plea that he do so. Surely the revelations late last week that the acting director of the FBI, Mr. L. Patrick Gray III, had himself been compromised by the drive to destroy evidence in the case, should reinforce the argument for removing the criminal prosecutions from the hands of those accountable for what has gone on so far.

To our way of thinking, a presidential move to assure strict and fair prosecution of crimes is, however, despite its importance, only a first step. It is required to get at one kind of truth, but inadequate to get at another. That other truth is not reducible to a list of which administration or party functionaries or bigwigs violated which criminal statutes at what time. It is the truth about the men who, whether or not they committed actual crimes, systematically and grossly betrayed their unsuspecting political constituency, the public at large, the institutions and values that are most important to this country and the faith so universally held that direction of the executive branch of government presupposes certain basic decencies in the men and women who are in charge. How grotesque it is that we have been reduced to speculating as to whether our national administration owes us confidence that its appointees and aides will not commit criminal acts. Is that not selling out pretty cheap? Are we not entitled as well to knowledge that these people who have been given such a large public trust will observe the basic decencies we require of a 7-year-old child? Or are lying and cheating all right—so long as no actual criminal statute has been broken?

Mr. Nixon got advice from Senator Stennis the other day that can be badly construed, when the Mississippi senator counseled him to "tough it out." And the President's own record of commentary on a variety of ordeals he has gone through in the past unfortunately suggests a propensity to do just that—to "tough it out," which is to say, to resist a change of course and wait for public attention to be detracted or for the political storm to blow over. He has also taken pride, in both the near and distant past, in what he evidently regards as the repeated vindication of this tactic—especially as it has run counter to much of the advice he has received from others. We would argue, however, that this particular "crisis" is different in both degree and kind from those others which Mr. Nixon has written and spoken about. For "toughing it out" in this case can only mean failing to terminate the services of those men around him who have

so thoroughly abused their power and so shockingly betrayed the good faith of those who put them in office. And failing to get such people out of office in turn can only mean that the larger and more damaging truth of the matter has been missed—namely, that this array of official, tax supported abuse and deception and contempt for the public and its rights and its self-respect represents a whole approach to governing that is and must remain intolerable to the American people.

It is hard, of course, to put a precise measure upon public trust, to separate it out from subjective judgments having to do with likings or dislikings, support or non-support. What is beyond question, however, is that the President's standing in the country has already slipped severely as a consequence of "Watergate." A Lou Harris poll published in this newspaper today attests undeniably to that. And it cannot be said, as often as some partisans of the President may argue it, that this is a partisan matter: the outcry from Senator Goldwater and Senator Dole and Republican Party Chairman Bush suggests that, if anything, dismay and disenchantment is running deepest among Republicans in general; and among those congressmen who must stand for re-election in particular.

In short, the "Watergate" and its attendant crimes cannot damage the President nearly as much as the President can if he fully fails to address the problem in a manner that can convince people that he is, first of all, not a part of it, and second, that he is prepared to assume his proper responsibility for setting things right. Putting it another way, Mr. Nixon will be gambling recklessly with that incalculable but essential ingredient—call it public trust or respect or confidence. For without it as George Will points out in an article elsewhere on this page today, he risks being reduced to a condition of holding of power without authority.

It is not difficult to count up the potential of this gamble. One need only examine what is at play. We are not among those who believe that corruption in the government is in itself a crippling liability for a President in his dealings with foreign friends or adversaries—who among them could cast the first stone? But it is almost an axiom that an American president who is incapable of exercising authority at home—incapable of dealing convincingly with domestic crises—is unlikely to cut a very impressive figure around the world. From this generality one can proceed, by way of illustration, to

specifics :what does it profit Dr. Kissinger, for instance, to launch a "historic" initiative in our dealings with Europe and Japan, if the President is so politically weakened at home that he cannot deliver the international trade legislation which is the vital substance of the Kissinger initiative? How persuasive can Mr. Nixon be in his carrot-and-stick maneuverings with Hanoi in pursuit of a Vietnam cease-fire if he is under attack and on the defensive in his own country; a Congress or a people aroused and alienated on one issue can usually be counted on to move onto the offensive all along the front. The list of urgent business runs on and on. Soaring prices; impending and potentially inflationary wage settlements; the gasoline shortage that looms this summer; scores of unfilled, high and middle level government position; a backlog of unsent messages to Congress; a full schedule of visitations by foreign leaders; critical negotiations on arms control and European security—all these are matters commanding presidential time and energy, as well as authority, and all would be placed at risk by trying to temporize, by "toughing it out" in the ionventional sense on the Watergate scandals.

Surely everyone, the President included, must acknowledge that much more than one man's political survival is at issue. What is at issue is the survival of effective government. We believe that "toughing it out" in the best sense means, first, recognizing this fact and, second, acting upon the obligation it imposes. That obligation mean accepting personal responsibility for what has been done . . . or countenanced . . . by those he put in office. And it means ridding his administration of all those, whether guilty or not of outright crimes, who have had a hand in the degradation of our institutions of government and our processes of law enforcement. Neither the Congress nor the public can any longer be expected to place their faith in programs and policies and actions fashioned and executed by the same cast of characters—with the same cast of mind—that brought forever into our language that cryptic and odious catch-word, "Watergate."



The Watergate—By Ken Feil, The Washington Post