

A Partial Beginning

In his comments and actions on the Watergate scandal yesterday, President Nixon did all that was inevitable—but not all that is necessary. His belated decision to dispense with the services of Attorney General Kleindienst, of John Dean 3d, his legal counsel, and of H. R. Haldeman and John Ehrlichman, his senior staff assistants, was a bow to the inescapable. It has been apparent for many days that their usefulness in public office was at an end.

Where Mr. Nixon still seems unwilling to do what is so clearly necessary is to accept the reality that restoration of confidence in the integrity of government will come only with a turnaway from Administration insiders in the choice of successors for these departed members of his inner circle. Substantial as are their personal talents, Elliot L. Richardson, the Attorney General-designate, and Leonard Garment, who has been temporarily assigned the duties of counsel to the President, have the same drawback as does William D. Ruckelshaus, who was named last week as acting director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. They are all close to the President and dependent on his continued favor.

To point out this elementary fact of life is not to derogate either their ability or their integrity, but to make clear why their appointments at this time are unsatisfactory. These are not the men of detachment from outside the Administration, of the type the situation requires. Mr. Nixon seems to think of Mr. Richardson, in particular, as a kind of totemic figure who can be moved about from one trouble spot to another as a symbol of honesty and Boston Brahmin disinterestedness.

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But the public impact of the Richardson-Ruckelshaus-Garment appointments in the present context is quite different. These appointments convey the impression of a President still reluctant to move beyond his own political circle and still determined to keep the investigation of Watergate as far as possible under his own control.

It is instructive to contrast President Nixon's moves with those of President Coolidge in the Teapot Dome scandals. Mr. Coolidge named Harlan Fiske Stone, the widely admired dean of the Columbia University School of Law, as Attorney General and chose Owen Roberts and former Senator Atlee Pomerene as special counsel in the Teapot Dome case. The Bar Association of the City of New York has urged a similar course upon Mr. Nixon, as have Congressmen of both parties. Inasmuch as the President seems unable to make that complete break, the public has no alternative except to rely upon the courts and the Senate select committee chaired by Senator Sam Ervin as the guarantors that the whole truth will eventually become known.

Like the Harding Administration scandals of a half-century ago, but in even more sinister and damaging fashion, the Watergate scandal involves the President's political confidants and some of his most trusted associates. In announcing yesterday's resignations, Mr. Nixon made a sharp distinction between Mr. Dean and the others who are quitting. The public can only reserve judgment on those gradations of responsibility until the full story unfolds. But it is apparent from the President's comments that he is not yet ready to confront the full enormity of this debacle and its implications. In his farewell words of praise for Mr. Haldeman and Mr. Ehrlichman and in his inward turn for successors, there is no hint of recognition by the President that the quality of his own leadership or his own staffing arrangements have been shown, at the very least, to be dangerously faulty.

The mania for secrecy, the arrogance toward Congress and the public, the overcentralization of authority, the suppression of internal dissent, and the failure to provide the President with alternative sources of information are weaknesses that will not necessarily depart from the White House with Messrs. Haldeman, Ehrlichman and Dean. Until those grave weaknesses are corrected, the country cannot be confident that Mr. Nixon has learned the lessons of Watergate.