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 Vietnam and Watergate

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IN THE NATION

A lot of Americans thought George McGovern hysterical last year when he said the Nixon Administration was "the most corrupt in American history." But neither Senator McGovern nor anyone who supported him should take pleasure in the considerable vindication they are now receiving. This grim spectacle of investigation, recrimination and resignation, overshadowed as it is by the probability of criminal indictment, shakes not just "the Nixon Administration" but American government, and to its roots.

Those roots lie in the confidence and trust of the American people. For two centuries, despite their amiable cynicism about many forms of graft and an almost admiring tolerance for colorful demagoguery, Americans have generally trusted their government—particularly that government most remote from them; in the twentieth century, that trust concentrated itself almost fanatically in the Presidency, as the one office capable of coping with the vast new concerns that rushed in at home and abroad. The result is a Presidential Government, in which the other branches serve mostly as occasionally effective anchors to windward.

Shake confidence in the Presidency, therefore, and you shake confidence in the Government. In the sixties, for millions of Americans, the war in Vietnam and its consequent deceptions and disillusionments first brought the office into distrust and contempt. Now the Watergate scandal is bound to extend that corrosion of confidence—particularly since the Nixon Administration came to office in 1969, and stayed in after 1972, not least because so many Americans believed Mr. Nixon's pledges to restore confidence, re-establish authority and preserve traditional American values.

But it seems reasonably clear that crimes including at least wiretapping, theft, burglary, breaking and entering, perjury, malfeasance in office, suborning perjury, bribery, forgery, obstruction of justice, various forms of conspiracy and numerous violations of both the election and campaign finance laws, have been planned, committed, connived at, condoned or covered up at high levels of the Government (which is to say the Presidency). The accompanying ethical transgressions—particularly the vile intrusion upon Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatric records—shatter even the most supple standards of personal or political conduct.

And no matter how strongly it may be asserted that Mr. Nixon knew nothing of any of this, and took strong action as soon as he did know, the facts remain that *he* gathered the cul-

prits about him, *he* gave them their power and whatever sense of his purposes and limits they may have had, and *he* failed in the first duty of a responsible official, which is to know what is being done in his name or with his authority.

These sorry facts, moreover, raise new and ominous questions about other, earlier matters of concern—the Administration's decision, for example, to raise milk support prices after major campaign contributions by the dairy industry, and the settlement in dubious circumstances of an important anti-trust suit against I.T.T.

This sad crumbling of an Administration and Mr. Nixon's desperate efforts to retrieve a position that so recently appeared imperial may seem nothing more than good political fodder to some Democrats; others, like the governors who canceled National Chairman Robert Strauss's plan to make a television speech on the subject, surely realize that whatever partisan advantage may be derived from the Watergate crimes is minor when measured against the damage to the nation, its institutions and its spirit.

The conclusion the Democrats as well as the Republicans would do best to draw is that the Presidency is not an imperial office. No matter who holds it, neither he nor his men are above the law or beyond political accountability. There is nothing inherently ennobling or mystic in the office—nothing that makes ordinary humans superhuman—nor is there anything about mere power that enhances character. Rather, it is how Presidents respond to their power—how they use it or refrain from using it—that can make them great, or make them corrupt.

Now two Administrations in succession have tried to push beyond the limits of the office, the first in making war, the second in securing its power; one was rebuked politically, to the detriment of its laudable domestic purposes; the other has been criminally tainted, to the possible endangerment of its foreign policy goals and achievements.

No doubt there is a certain rough justice in both cases; it is even possible that in the perverse way of human nature, the Presidency has been saved, not destroyed by these retributions; but if that is to be so, Mr. Nixon and his successors will have no greater task than to show that they are worthy of trust. After Vietnam and the Watergate, they had better not count on blind faith.