

The Hope of the World

By Anthony Lewis

WASHINGTON — The last great scandals of an American Government, fifty years ago, seem now to have had an almost endearing simplicity about them. Warren G. Harding and his cronies wanted only whisky, women and money. They come down to us as characters in a musical comedy.

History will not treat Richard Nixon and his associates with such mocking disdain. For their vice was something much worse than old-fashioned avarice and lust. Their sin was arrogance, their object power.

Sins of the flesh have always been regarded as less serious than the sin of pride, which is a challenge to God. In today's society, with all its instruments of control, abuse of power is infinitely more dangerous than mere corruption. In politics as in religion, arrogance is a threat to the natural order of life, to the pattern of mutual respect and understanding in which our safety lies.

The crimes of the Nixon Administration cannot yet be listed with particularity. The legislative and judicial proceedings to come will almost certainly make the present dimensions of our distress seem modest. But the general character of what has been done in these last years is plain enough.

The White House staff has functioned in single-minded pursuit of centralized power. Ideas, debate, dissent, even contact with the unfriendly: All have been suppressed in this Government in favor of loyalty to Mr. Nixon.

The lawyers of this Administration have made their names symbols of contempt for law. The lawyer-President has thrown dirt on judges. His lawyers in the White House have sent thugs out after psychiatric files and conspired to obstruct justice. His one-time Attorney General is under investigation by a grand jury.

In foreign affairs also the record is blotted with crude lawlessness. Even as domestic scandal came to crisis this week, the lawyer who fills the once-great office of Secretary of State submitted a paper on the constitutional authority for American bombing of Cambodia that would not earn a first-year law student a passing grade.

The chief fund-raiser of the President's re-election campaign, a former Cabinet officer, demanded and got large sums from businessmen who deal with the Government, including some in trouble with the law. Other political agents tried to sabotage the opposition's campaign, even its choice of a candidate. The little we know puts in question the honor of the entire 1972 election.

ABROAD AT HOME

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It is a sordid record—and a menacing one, for running through it is the authoritarian mind. What begins with that spirit in politics, in rigging elections, goes on to police agents terrorizing innocent families in some small town in Illinois. The danger of official lawlessness is tyranny.

The explosion of the Watergate scandal has saved America from the immediate threat of centralized Presidential power. Richard Nixon is in no position now to threaten the courts or the press, or even to demand blind loyalty from his subordinates. Indeed, the men of character in his Government will be in the extraordinary position of being able to make the President accept them on their terms. He will need them more than they him.

What threatens America now is an enfeebled Presidency. At best Mr. Nixon will be asking the world to believe that the men he chose as his closest associates committed evil without his knowing it. And it may be much worse: The doubts may come ever closer to him. The authority of the President, which is to say the authority of the United States, will be gravely damaged.

If Richard Nixon were capable of redeeming vision or self-perception, the prospect would be less painful. But he is not. He is a man who can obstruct election campaign reform and then ask the public to join him in a great reform effort. He is a man who can speak of the Christmas bombing of Vietnam as "my terrible personal ordeal." He is a man without shame.

The appalling dilemma facing this country is how to live for nearly four years with a wounded Presidency. Some people argue for what amounts to a conspiracy of silence. We must close our eyes to what has happened, they say, and let government continue—almost as it was allowed to continue after Woodrow Wilson's illness.

The alternative is forbidding. No President has ever been forced from office; even a serious attempt would put awful strains on the system. But can this country stop short of the truth, can it live a pretense, and be once again the hope of the world?
