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Men at Home in the Daylight

By Bill Moyers

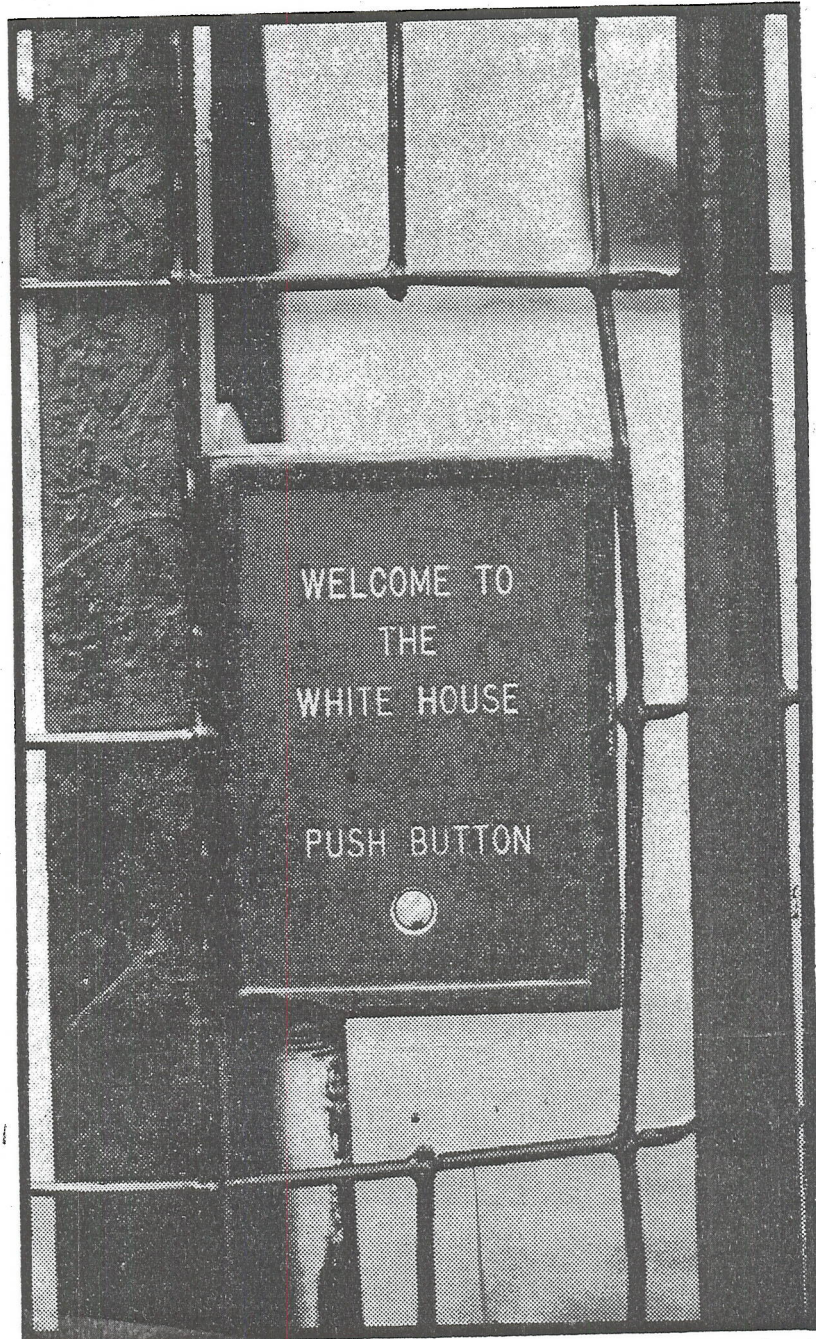
I don't want to read one more column or editorial expressing the belief that Watergate should be resolved in a way that enables us to keep on trusting in the Presidency.

The Presidency is not something to believe in. In one sense it is nothing but an office, with chairs, desks, carpets, telephones and marks in the floor left by Dwight Eisenhower's golf shoes as he stalked out to the putting green on the south lawn. Nothing there, not even the pictures of the few previous occupants who deserve to be called great, will suddenly nullify old habits or endow a man with virtues he never had.

In another sense the Presidency is a depository of tradition and legal power. But even in this it is neutral. It will shrink to fit the most mendacious soul or grow to accommodate the most generous. The trappings of the office may enable a man to hide his petty faults (although in the long run I doubt it), but they contain no mystical power to change his character. A man given to extravagance, as Lyndon Johnson was, will go right on doing everything in excess. A man like Richard Nixon who all his life played to win isn't suddenly going to insist that his colleagues memorize Robert's Rules of Order.

The question is whether Richard Nixon can regain the trust Watergate has shattered. If he were to be found personally involved in the corruptions there is nothing he could do to restore his effectiveness. But if he did not order or approve the illegal activities and if he did not engage in the cover-up (and for the country's sake I hope this is the case, he might yet recover enough public confidence to function successfully for the next three years. Here, unsolicited, are a few suggestions:

- Come out from behind the Presidency. Mr. Nixon has been so deeply isolated by men with the vision of a needle's eye and so obsessed with the



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specious paraphernalia of the office that he has relied upon manipulation rather than leadership to achieve his goals. He has taken too literally the swollen image of the Presidency as "the symbol of our grandeur," assuming, therefore, that we would follow him for authority's sake rather than on merit. This imperial concept of the office, I believe, encouraged his underlings to incredible lengths, certain that the sovereignty of the President was the only justification necessary for their action.

● Start reading the newspapers. The daily summary of news Mr. Nixon got from such ideologically myopic deputies as Patrick Buchanan (who reportedly wrote some of Vice President Agnew's blistering attacks on the very press being summarized) obviously failed to alert him to what any reasonably informed resident of Washington was long ago beginning to perceive: that something was rotten in his own backyard.

● Order his assistants to stop clicking their heels. Every President finds his staff soon dividing into two groups: those who snap to attention and obey every order blindly, and those who say, "Yes, sir, but . . ." The latter may nettle the President but in the long run they can save him from his own impetuosity.

● Open other doors. The whole tone of the White House is set by whom the President encourages: the heel-clickers or the question-askers. If the first group gains access, the White House will be closed to dissenting

opinions. John F. Kennedy once told Kenneth P. O'Donnell, his appointments secretary, "to guard that front door jealously," but then the President himself opened the back door to members of his staff he thought O'Donnell might not welcome.

● Stop asking us to live on faith. A nation dulled by rhetoric is falling back now on the belief that "by their fruits shall ye know them." It is waiting for the President to back up his good intentions with action.

● Rein the instinct for power. Like some of his predecessors, Mr. Nixon has pushed his powers to new limits, but at what price and for what purpose? As the late Clinton Rossiter wrote in "The American Presidency," Abraham Lincoln "went to the well of power in behalf of humanity and re-dedicated the Presidency to the cause of liberty." But it is one thing to command power for the purpose of saving the Union and another for the sake of preserving one's own regime.

Finally, it will take more than a change of staff or a change of posture to save Mr. Nixon's Presidency. It will take a change of heart.

If a President has contempt for the press, some of his most fanatical assistants won't mind lying to reporters.

If he thinks dissent is unpatriotic, they will not hesitate to subvert the Constitution to deal with it.

If he considers the preservation of his power to be his chief end, he will not have to hire a single saboteur or order a single wire tap to help him keep it—they'll do it for him.

The Indians in southeastern Oklahoma, where I was born, admonished their young to "live like men who are at home in daylight." While none of us who have been in public service can claim to have lived perfectly by that standard, it remains an ideal worth striving for. President Nixon would do well to insist that it be framed on the walls of every associate for the remainder of his term.

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