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Truth and Consequences: II

By Anthony Lewis

LONDON, May 15 — If President Nixon understood the larger meaning of the events labeled Watergate, if he sought to respond to the public yearning they have evoked, if he wished to cleanse himself and his country of their stain, he would have to begin by rededicating his Government to one principle: respect for law. It is an undertaking that would carry him well beyond the immediate facts of Watergate.

Never again, he would have to pledge, will any officer of my Administration act as if he were above the law, as if official power were unrestrained by law.

Never again will my officials commit crimes to advance a cause that they have decided is good; they will forsake the pernicious doctrine that the end justifies the means.

Never again will I or any of my associates interfere with the judicial process or attack the integrity of the judges of the United States.

Never again will anyone in my White House use the foreign intelligence apparatus of this country for domestic political purposes.

Never again will White House agents try to take over police functions, or use unlawful wiretapping or sabotage the political process.

Never again will an Attorney General of mine bring political prosecutions or cases asking the courts to create criminal law that Congress has not passed.

Never again will this Administration unilaterally attempt to repeal or emasculate legislation duly enacted by Congress.

Never again will I or my assistants use the licensing process or other administrative power to try to bring the press and television into line.

Never again will my defense and foreign policy spokesmen lie about American military operations abroad.

Never again will I disregard the limits put on war-making by the Constitution of the United States.

Those are assurances of the kind needed to make America whole again at this extraordinary and tormented moment of her history. To imagine such undertakings is to realize what makes our hearts ache: it is lawlessness; it is official contempt for the rule of law.

To make such a list of assurances—and each of us can make his own—is also to realize how unlikely it is that we can look to Richard Nixon for restoration of our country's integrity. Respect for history and for institutions which in the American context is to say respect for law, is just not in him.

AT HOME ABROAD

There was a marvellously revealing moment when the House of Representatives voted last week against a Defense Department request for funds to continue the illegal bombing of Cambodia. The President's press secretary immediately said that the vote would make no difference; the bombing would go on because it was "right."

"Right" because Nixon said so, no matter what the Constitution said: It was the same old official arrogance and lawlessness, supported by the same old lies about the extent of American involvement in an Asian civil war.

It is two weeks now since President Nixon spoke to the country about Watergate. Two former members of his Cabinet have been indicted. White House agents have been condemned by a conservative Federal trial judge for interfering in the course of justice. The country waits for some sign of sensitivity in this President, some hint that he understands what has gone wrong. There is nothing.

If he is to regain the trust that is the foundation of political authority in a democracy, Mr. Nixon would have to do more than give personal pledges of a change in course. He would have to change the people in his Administration enough to demonstrate an end to the narrow, vengeful partisanship that has characterized it so far. He would have to bring in larger-minded men and women from outside.

Here again there is no occasion for hope. The personnel changes so far have been reshuffles of the old deck; the test has been loyalty to Mr. Nixon. The hasty insertion of John Connally as an unpaid White House adviser is especially interesting — a Nixon move not to the old Republicans or to eminent nonpartisan figures but to his natural consistency: the new money, oil, aerospace, the South.

All the signs are that the President still believes he can ride out this little local difficulty. He will wrap himself in the troubles of the world. Henry Kissinger will talk about Atlantic charters. Leonid Brezhnev will come to Washington to help the best President he has.

Will it work? Will Americans be distracted by the glamor of world statesmanship from the unfinished business of official lawlessness at home? Will they weary of the pursuit of truth? The questions are for us, all of us, for the answers will demonstrate the character of our country.