

NYTimes

MAY 16 1973

The Colonies Will Overcome

By John Gardner

WASHINGTON—There's much talk of what Watergate has done to the President or the Presidency—most of it beside the point, none of it deserving of the hand-wringing apprehension that commonly accompanies it. The fate of a President is a matter of concern. But the fate of a nation is of more concern; and if we focus too insistently on the Presidency we may learn the wrong lesson.

What got us into the horrors of Watergate is unbridled Presidential power. We must curb that power in important ways. And that requires, among other things, that we remain reasonably calm during this difficult period of time. When the American people are in a state of alarm, they do not decrease the powers of the Presidency—they increase them.

If the people are alarmed, and if we insist on making the Presidency our central preoccupation, it is quite possible that Mr. Nixon's successor (whenever the succession occurs) will come into office with a powerful mandate to re-establish order and play father to a troubled citizenry. Then all the agonies of Watergate will have taught us nothing.

Given the extraordinary power the White House has accumulated over the last four decades, it is inevitable that the power would be misused.

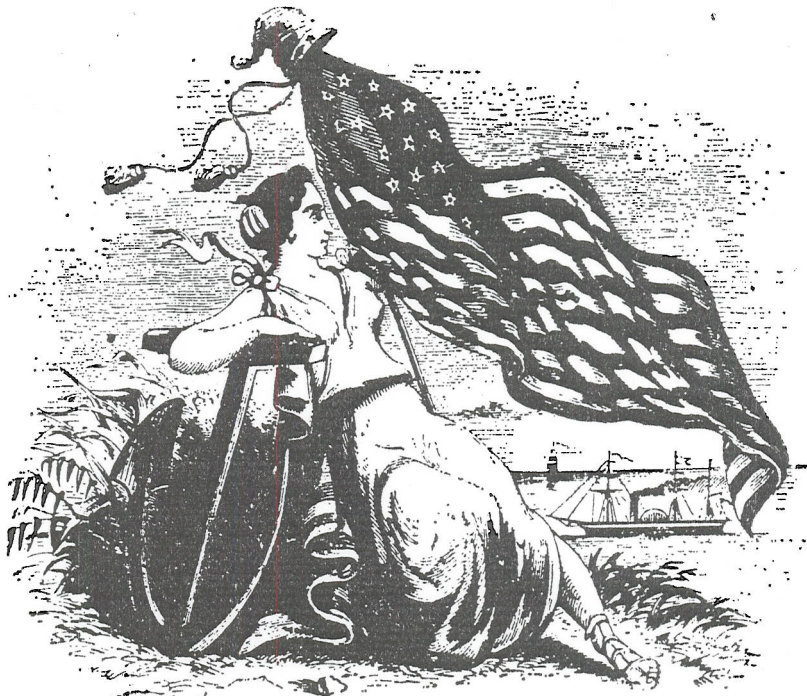
The exposure—by the press, the courts, Congress and citizen action—of the rascality behind Watergate is taken by some as gratifying evidence that "our system" is working as it should. We can't linger on that self-congratulatory note without risking a fat-headed complacency. The system almost didn't work.

Here are some things that need doing:

First, the full story of Watergate must be told. There are those who are already saying we've had enough of the bad news. Others may grow bored with continued investigations. But nothing will more surely feed the skepticism and paranoia abroad in the land than for Watergate to have a missing last chapter.

Second, Congress must be restored as an equal branch of Government. The difficulties in doing so are great. There is a deeply unheroic streak in Congress that does not covet responsibility nor welcome tests of courage. But there are also, in the Senate and the House, individuals with exceptional gifts for leadership who have been unable to exercise those gifts because of the diminished role of the legislative branch. Recent years in Congress have not been a time for greatness.

That can change. But it won't change without unrelenting pressure



Handbook of Early American Advertising Art/Dover

from the press and the public. Events have not given Congress a massive transfusion of courage. Watergate has had consequences, but they fall short of the miraculous.

It's time for the public to insist that members of Congress act decisively. The tougher we are in that instant, the more certain it will be that exceptional leaders will emerge in both houses. Good constituencies make good leaders.

Third, Congress will have to take (with pressure from press and public) specific steps to restore integrity to the public process, among them, campaign financing reform, a nonpolitical Department of Justice, open government, guarantees of press freedom, lobbying disclosure and conflict-of-interest laws. It won't help to plead that everyone must be more ethical. We must create circumstances in which it is vastly more difficult to be unethical. The political process as it now functions invites corruption — makes it easy and makes it pay. That must be changed.

Special emphasis must be given to the question of campaign financing. There are honest givers and honest receivers of campaign gifts, but present practices legitimize bribery. The flat-footed bribe is a quaint, old-fashioned thing. The campaign gift is the modern, all-purpose equivalent. Watergate was financed with secret campaign cash.

Finally, the Administration must act to re-establish lines of communication with other elements in our national life, lines that have been severed, one by one, in the last few years. In dealing with China and Russia the Presi-

dent opened channels of constructive communication to people with whom he was not in philosophical agreement. If he were to pursue the same course domestically, he would end the isolation that has so often undermined his judgment.

The events of recent months have stirred apprehension and concern. But as a people, we have more stamina than we know. The requirements of mass communication focus the whole drama of national and international events on the personality of one man. But the fate of the nation has never been wrapped in one man. Watergate may or may not have weakened the President. Historically we have survived a good many weak Presidents.

When this nation was founded, there was a holy Roman emperor; Venice was a Republic, France was ruled by a king, China by an emperor, Japan by a shogun, Russia by a czar. Great Britain was a monarchy tempered by the barest beginnings of democracy (less than 2 per cent of the population enjoyed voting representation). All those proud regimes—and scores of others—have passed into history; and among the world powers the only government that stands essentially unchanged is the Federal Union put together in the 1780's by thirteen states on the East Coast of North America.

It will survive Watergate.

John Gardner, former Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare, heads Common Cause, a citizens' lobby.