

By William Safire

ESSAY

Piercing through a couple of floors of the Smithsonian Institution's Museum of History and Technology in Washington is a great pendulum. To tourists and scientists, its long, slow swings demonstrate the motion of the earth, but to politicians it symbolizes the inexorability of change in public opinion.

Five years ago, Senator Edward Kennedy was widely regarded to be the Democrat most likely to be President. Four years ago, he was considered washed up. Today he is back in the lists, vigorously denouncing Watergate.

Nine years ago, Barry Goldwater was seen by many Americans as the embodiment of evil; "in your guts you know he's nuts," they said, and he received the worst trouncing since Alf Landon; today, because of his personal probity, his good humor in defeat, the discreditation of his opponents, and the fact that he is no threat, Goldwater has become the liberals' favorite conservative.

A decade ago, Richard Nixon was groping around the floor for the pieces of his career like a man who lost both contact lenses; three months ago, he bestrode the earth like a Colossus, treating longtime detractors with a delighted vindictiveness; today, he's down there again picking up the pieces.

Most of us have had our ups and downs in life, but few of us have really ridden the giant pendulum back and forth. We think of our times as this week, not this year, and certainly not in four-year terms.

We are bedazzled by the hall of mirrors that is the media: newspapers compete to extract the widest headline from an unfolding story; news-magazines reflect the hysteria and put out excited press releases on Sunday about what will appear in their own pages the next week and television reports on the reports of the reports. The fad in magazine covers is a photograph of a statue of a person or a collage of a subject, as if communications itself wanted to back off from reality when events move rapidly.

To a man who has ridden the pendulum as long as Richard Nixon, the hysteria, depression, secret delight and genuine concern that form the amalgam of public opinion today can be viewed with a certain resigned perspective. The orders from the command post are to retreat in good order, taking care not to let the necessary withdrawal turn into a rout.

That is why we do not see new faces taking the place of men who had to be dropped or who left in a hurry. Critics complain this is only a reshuffle; but the President wants to show the nation he appointed a lot of trustworthy people in his first term who were untouched by Watergate. The President's inclination to deal with

trusted old hands is a part of the reason why new people are not being brought in now: the major part, however, is to avert the appearance of rout, with new faces seeming to "save" the President. That is also primarily why the President's critics are demanding fresh troops and denouncing the game of musical chairs—it is a good way of getting the President to admit not only a lapse of attention but a fundamental misjudgment of people.

Besides his experience as an old pendulum-rider, the President has another reason for his "peace at the center": he knows what he did not know. He knows he was not guilty of a crime, and the worst that can be proved is misplaced trust, which is why he can confidently take the attitude that "this, too, shall pass."

And it will. The price of gold will come down, the stock market will go up, some Democrat with a suitcase full of cash will be exposed, the Mets will win the Series, a new Cliff Irving will seize the headlines and public boredom will help stabilize the ship of state by proving once again that it is always darkest before the dawn. Nixon, the man who practically invented modern political survival, will survive, and finish in a bicentennial glow.

The President could speed this process by getting some perspective on his perspective: as Kipling did not say, "If you can keep your head while all others about you are losing theirs, perhaps you don't understand the seriousness of the situation." The usual Nixon tactic when the pendulum is far out on its latest arc is to lean back in hard, exuding confidence, dismissing scandal as an unfortunate incident, counterpunching at excessive charges that offend a spirit of fairness.

But more powerful forces are gathering to dispel what is semi-annually described as "the crisis of confidence" by commentators who never know quite how to describe the times when confidence is not in crisis. When nobody can prove the President culpable; when the anti-Nixon brigade gets too strident and stimulates a reaction; when world leaders meet and peace and security are factored into the Nixon equation; then we will see these days as a strange, dark interlude in the midst of prosperous, peacemaking times.

Someday the pendulum at the Smithsonian might smash through the wall and keep on going in one direction, but it is a safer bet that the pendulum will keep swinging back, and that the people who lightly bandy about words like "impeachment" will be ashamed of themselves, and the doomsayers, as always, will have to recalculate their dire predictions and move back the date of the end of the world.