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Mr. Nixon's Swan Song?

At this point in the Watergate crisis a conscientious citizen, concerned not just with the President's predicament but with the country's, has got to start wondering whether or how the country could get along without Mr. Nixon, were he to leave office by one route or another, or to lose effective power.

If some regard it as an unfriendly act to raise the question, then others will grant that—regardless of one's feeling for the man—the question of the country becomes increasingly more difficult to avoid. Such sympathetic and seasoned observers of the President as columnists Stewart Alsop of Newsweek and Crosby Noyes of the Star-News suggest that Mr. Nixon is himself the kind of man to frame the problem of Watergate in this way:

I take it for granted that the consensus of dispassionate observers and partisan observers alike is that, as far as domestic affairs are concerned, the United States could do without the President. This has relatively little to do with his policies. The ongoing contests between the parties on the one hand and between the branches of government on the other, and the particular stage of working out tensions that the country is going through now: these sticky components of the national life would tend to persist and to limit the maneuverability of anyone who succeeded Mr. Nixon. They may constitute a kind of political fail-safe.

"Anyone" means, before 1976, only Spiro Agnew. Just this week, in an interview with Post staff writer Lou Cannon, the Vice President reminded the rest of us (not for the first time) that he's hanging around without much to do, that he's frustrated not to be making executive decisions but hasn't lost the knack and that he has "absolutely no connection" with Watergate.

Judgments vary on how well Mr. Agnew could perform as President in domestic affairs. It seems fair to observe, however, that judgments on him did not vary nearly so much while he was governor of Maryland, and in his early days as vice president before he became the administration's chief political lancer. Indeed, some of his recent more moderate pronouncements have narrowed the variance a bit again.

If he became President, he would have a new boy's honeymoon of a certain length, the additional cushion of the crisis atmosphere in which he would take office, plus what advantages he could extract from being free of Watergate taint. Many Republicans might tend to support him out of party loyalty, many Democrats out of resignation or relief.

It is, I think, in the area of international affairs that the most serious questions would arise. Any doubts about how important it is to most Americans to have in the White House someone who conveys strength and competence in dealing on a world stage surely were dispelled by the licking which Richard Nixon administered to George McGovern.

Nixon is not only a known quantity, as Agnew, or someone else in 1976 would not be; he is a proven quantity. Lingered differences over Vietnam cannot obscure the broad agreement among Americans (well, not everybody) that the President possesses not only a cool hand in a crisis but a steady eye on the big picture in world affairs.

There is an incipient tendency, perhaps more, in the Nixon defense against Watergate to claim that "national security" justified certain otherwise distasteful deeds. Some will suspect Mr. Nixon is working a Pavlovian stimulus, used by a great many American politicians over the last generation to make the public cringe docilely and take orders from the state for the sake of "national security."

But even those who believe they can separate a fake scare from the true state of the world may have second thoughts, as they think of it, about removing a strong foreign-affairs President at this moment of international passage, or curbing his authority.

The question of whether to lose a President who's done some dubious or dirty things is a lot easier than the question of whether to lose a President who is widely regarded at home and abroad as good for peace in the world. One sees the latter issue asserting itself as Watergate tightens: Sen. James Buckley (Con. R-N.Y.), for instance, urges "all Americans to give the President the support he needs and deserves in this troubled time." Mr. Nixon has sounded the note too and not, one guesses, for the last time.

The forthcoming Nixon-Brezhnev summit poses the problem nicely. The summit—the whole current shape and prospect of Soviet-American relations—is Mr. Nixon's baby. Who wants to take it away from him? Or him away from it? The gut reaction of many people may be that the world is still such a dangerous place, and Mr. Nixon demonstrably such an able pilot, that he should stay at the helm. One can easily imagine how an international crisis might feed this sort of reaction.

I would respond that by his first term successes, Mr. Nixon has gone far toward making the world safe enough, so to speak, for a less experienced occupant of the White House. Particularly might this be so if the forthcoming meeting with Brezhnev goes well. The summit could as well be a swan song as a comeback to a President who had decided to make it so. Mr. Nixon's judgment to that effect would offer powerful reassurance to those who now instinctively recoil at the prospect of his fall from power.