

James Reston

The Day They Stopped Going Along

Washington

THE MAIN RULE for political success in this town for many years and even many generations has been that "to get along you have to go along," and now all the characters in the Watergate case who followed this rule are beginning to wonder.

Nobody went along with the President more than Haldeman and Ehrlichman, and even McCord, Hunt, Liddy and all the other cooperative characters, but now most of them are either in jail or on the TV telling how they lost their way and should not be put in jail.

This hurts a lot of people and also the White House, but maybe what is now hurting the Administration may in the end help the republic.

So far in the Watergate hearings, nothing has been settled, but everything in American political life has been affected and is now subject to change for the better.



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PRESIDENT NIXON has been seriously, and perhaps irreparably, damaged. The conspiratorial secrecy he loved has been destroyed before the television cameras. His attempts to enhance the power of the presidency at the expense of the Congress have eroded his own power and enhanced the power of Capitol Hill. His war on permissiveness has been exposed as a fraud by his permissive associates. He established a Politburo in the White House that was supposed to run everything efficiently and in the end was not able to run itself.

More testimony may change the picture, but already enough unchallenged evidence has been put on the record to stain the Administration, and paradoxically to rescue the nation from its slide from politics into a form of political warfare.

In the short run, there are some awkward problems. The dollar is under pressure again partly because the European money managers think the President is weaker and may not have enough authority now to control inflation in the United States.

Also, the prevailing cynicism of the young critics of American society at home is likely to get worse for a while, since Mr. Nixon, exonerated or not, will almost certainly remain in office for three and a half more years.

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NEVERTHELESS, some good things are likely to come out of this mess. The reaction of many political leaders here of both parties is almost one of relief. They have been living with a system of campaign financing that they knew to be a scandal, and even many of those who benefited by it would be glad to see it destroyed.

It took the Watergate and its associated crimes and stupidities to break the system. The thing could not be done without the friction of a disgraceful scandal or the leadership of a President who was determined to get rid of campaign financing corruption—and we haven't had the latter.

Also the Watergate has exposed all kinds of other corruption which have grown up in Washington over the years. Most of the politicians have succumbed to the idea of "going along."

This influenced the Watergate tragedy all along the line. The President himself encouraged it. Anybody who didn't "go along" with what he wanted was regarded with suspicion, and often treated as his enemy.

The cast of characters in this whole tragedy is full of men who got into trouble because, out of ambition, fear or confusion of loyalties, they merely followed the old "go along" system.

What the Watergate has done is to make a great many people around here realize that a whole lifetime of hard work, and even good intentions, can quickly be destroyed simply by failing to tell the truth or obstructing justice by their silence, or taking money that they know they should not have taken.

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THE IMPORTANT and beneficial consequences of Watergate lie not only in new campaign financing laws but in these personal imponderables."

Until Watergate, dishonesty and political backscratching paid big dividends around here — and of course it will go on — but now a lot of people in this town in the White House, the Cabinet, the Congress, the bureaucracy and the press are emboldened to take a different line — to tell the truth and take their chances.

This is the main hope of the Watergate. It is not yet finished — in fact it has just begun — but every day's testimony before the Ervin committee is a drop of poison in the old system, and maybe as a result of these hearings, the system will eventually be changed.

N.Y. Times Service