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Law, Not Men

By Anthony Lewis

BOSTON, May 27—The hopeful view of Watergate is that it represents only a personal aberration in a still sound political structure. The fault, then, would lie in the character of Richard Nixon, not in the Presidential institution and what it has become.

This proposition was argued recently by a one-time assistant to President Johnson, E. Ernest Goldstein. Writing in *The International Herald-Tribune*, Goldstein contrasted Mr. Nixon's seclusion and secretiveness with the Johnson years, when he said the White House was "truly wide open to all shades of opinion" and the President "understood and respected the American political system." His conclusion was that the Watergate disaster was "purely Richard Nixon's."

It is a comforting view, especially to liberals. But it will not wash, and the reasons must be understood—especially by liberals.

Can anyone really believe that the passion for secrecy arrived in the White House on Jan. 20, 1969? Lyndon Johnson loved secrecy and surprise so much that several times he was thought to have changed his decisions rather than confirm what had leaked to the press.

It was Mr. Johnson who used the highly doubtful allegations of North Vietnamese attacks on American naval vessels in the Tonkin Gulf to whip Congress into a patriotic fervor and get a blank check for war. The reassurances given to Senators worried about deeper U. S. involvement in Vietnam matched anything in our recent history for Presidential deceit.

Then, in 1965, Johnson took his country fully into the war while denying that he was doing so. As late as

ABROAD AT HOME

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June 9, 1965, with many thousands of Americans engaged in combat, the White House issued a statement saying:

"There has been no change in the mission of U.S. ground combat units . . . The primary mission of those troops is to secure and safeguard important military installations . . . If help is requested by the appropriate Vietnamese commander, General Westmoreland also has the authority within the assigned mission to employ these troops in support of Vietnamese forces faced with aggressive attack when other effective reserves are not available . . . This discretionary authority does not change the primary mission . . ."

That was how the American people were told that they were going into a massive land war in Asia. It was a deception that cost the country dearly in economic dislocation, and even more dearly in public faith.

More broadly, outside the war issue, Mr. Johnson lived the theory of the imperial Presidency. It is true that a wide range of people had access to his office; but his press secretary, George Reedy, has pointed out how they muted their real opinions in deference to his. Mr. Johnson encouraged Americans to look to the White House, to "your President," for solutions of all the difficulties of a diverse and continental country.

But of course the expanded modern concept of Presidential government has earlier origins. It began with Franklin Roosevelt in economic crisis and went on through the traumas of World War II and the cold war. They were problems with which only a centralized, Presidential system could deal. Or so most liberals thought—all but those who still believed, with the makers of the Constitution, that a unitary Government headed by a single political figure would concentrate power too dangerously.

The process has undoubtedly gone much further in the last four years. Lyndon Johnson at least had a concern for Congress; Richard Nixon has shown contempt. Mr. Johnson, for all his faults of personality, dreamed large dreams; Mr. Nixon, judging from his own statements, has had paranoid nightmares of insecurity.

But the danger goes back well before the present crisis of confidence. It lies in confiding too many of our hopes and fears in the President. No human being can be expected to resist the distorting temptations of power that such adulation brings—least of all the ambitious men, the outer-directed men who usually become President.

On his last evening in office, President Johnson gave a party for his staff. According to Mr. Goldstein, he warned his assistants against criticizing the new President unfairly. He said:

"You know as well as I do that being President of the United States is like being the pilot of an airplane and being a citizen is like being a passenger on that airplane. If the pilot fails, it is the end for the citizen-passengers."

No. The President is not the pilot of an airplane. We do not confide our lives to him. We do not give him absolute power over his ship; we do not make him the law for that journey. And we shall not cure the deeper disease of Watergate until we get over the cult of personality and return to the American system of law and constitutional order.