

# The Missing Reassurance

These thoughts were impelled by lunch with a White House friend. Few insights were exchanged. It was, in truth, a rather raw and inconclusive affair. But one question (his) was left hanging in the air, and I have been thinking about it since. "What do you people want?" he asked at one point. "What is it you really think should happen?" It wasn't, God knows, an offer. It was a perplexed inquiry that translated roughly as follows: "What do you people really want from Richard Nixon? Will you allow him any defense? Or do you require his total humiliation?"

The context, of course, was Watergate, and "you people" meant not just The Washington Post or even the press as such, but rather that large and growing generality of people who, no matter what the President does, seem to think it's not enough. There was reproach mixed with the curiosity, and

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reflecting on the question later, I thought I could see what was causing the impasse. For Richard Nixon has indeed already sacrificed plenty by way of propitiating the angry Watergate gods. So he has, in that sense, already "given" a great deal to his critics in the Watergate affair. And yet, from the point of view, I suspect, of many people, he continues to withhold a single indispensable assurance and one that must probably precede any genuine resolution of the question of his role in their minds.

To understand what that is, I think it is first necessary to take a better measure than people have so far of what Mr. Nixon has already yielded up and/or been obliged to concede. We are so involved and engulfed in a daily hurricane of unprecedented events that we seem to have lost the ability to judge their size and meaning by normal standards, to recognize the implications of what has already occurred. So let us try to consider from Mr. Nixon's point of view and by some yardstick of normality what the costs and concessions to date in fact have been:

- A President of the United States has permitted the authority of his office to be used for the appointment of a special prosecutor to pursue independently a criminal investigation of his government.

- Resignations of the President's most important appointees have been accepted wholesale. They include those of the Acting Director of the FBI; the Chairman of the Securities and Exchange Commission; the Attorney General; two high officials in Transportation and Commerce; the President's personal attorney, his White House attorney, his chief of staff, his principal domestic counsellor and his appointments secretary.

- Indictments have been brought by government attorneys who are at least theoretically responsible to the President against his own former Attorney General and his own former Secretary of Commerce. And other government attorneys are working toward other indictments of other close associates of Mr. Nixon.

- The President has publicly asserted that executive privilege has all but been suspended so far as interrogation of his associates is concerned on matters connected with criminal activities.

- The President has publicly conceded that every statement he and his spokesmen made on the subject over a 10-month period was unreliable, if not false. He has suggested that he was deceived—systematically—by some of his closest and most important associates. He has on three occasions sought publicly to clarify his role in the affair, each time conceding error and once offering praise to those (the judge and the press) who pursued the case and ultimately brought about his present turmoil.

By ordinary—and even extraordinary—standards, that adds up to a pretty sizable dose of humiliation and

a pretty impressive collection of admissions. What accounts, then, for the continuing pressure, for the unappeased appetite, for the refusal to recognize and accept what the President has already conceded. "What"—as the question went—"do you people want?" Probably there are plenty of Nixon critics who, in fact, do desire nothing more, which is to say nothing less, than the President's total abasement and mortification. And there is plainly another, quite different school of thought which concerns itself primarily with discovering how much the President "knew" of the assorted

crimes and depredations surrounding his office, even though it now seems apparent that he "knew" plenty and even though it has become a close question, given the size of the conspiracy, whether his "knowing" or his "not knowing" would be worse. But there is something else that has to do with knowing which is also unresolved and which strikes me as being at the heart of many people's failure to be satisfied with Mr. Nixon's response to date. It is the fact that there is no evidence in either the President's actions since March or, more importantly, in his three public statements since then, that he understands now what was wrong—what was really wrong—about the clandestine, thug-like things that were going on. That, it seems to me, is the key reassurance that is missing.

What, after all, has the President told the public? What has he conveyed to be his general understanding of the problem? Various he has said that, in his opinion, some well-motivated but over-zealous friends have gone too far in their pursuit of what they believed to be right; that our campaign financing laws should be reformed to prevent abuses by both parties; that anyone found guilty of violating a criminal statute should be subjected to the processes of criminal justice; that, so far as protecting the national security is concerned, you've got to employ a few unattractive techniques; and that, if there was some spillover from that national security concern to baser political activities, it was reprehensible—but not so reprehensible that the effort to uncover it should have compromised (i.e. made public) the existence of a group of White House footpads who were meant to be doing more elevated things.

That, I expect, is not enough for people who are truly anxious about the pattern of behavior that has been revealed, people who are neither lusting after some extra pound of flesh nor beating a drum for resignation or impeachment or anything so cataclysmic as that. Indeed, whatever one may think about those last two alternatives, it seems obvious to me that there is a crucial question to be answered first. We have been exposed to evidence of a power-grabbing conspiracy within and at the highest levels of the U.S. government, evidence that men in whom the President put his trust and to whom he granted great power systematically abused that power and turned the instruments of government against the people themselves. Institutions that were thought to be insulated from politics—and necessarily so—have been the targets of politicization; criminal methods have been employed by government and with the use of public funds to deceive people, to distort the information they receive and to do individuals harm. Surely people want to know whether Mr. Nixon perceives as much, and surely they want some indication of what he thinks about it.

I think it is a fact that the President's Watergate critics have not taken an accurate measure of all that the President has already paid in for the Watergate scandals. But I think it is also a fact that the President himself has yet to take an accurate measure—or at least to share it with us—of the particular character of the wrongdoing that has been exposed. In short, people who may still be prepared to believe that Mr. Nixon never knew in relevant detail what was being done in his name, have yet to be given assurance that—even now—the President understands what was so special and so wrong about it.