

On the Eighth Day

By Anthony Lewis

WASHINGTON, June 6—When Britain and France launched their attack on Suez in the autumn of 1956, the United States was sharply critical. President Eisenhower and Secretary of State Dulles put the heaviest pressure on the British to call the invasion off. But the Prime Minister, Sir Anthony Eden, said his Government would not take orders from its great ally.

Then the pound began feeling the effects of American and world disapproval. The British considered seeking a standby credit from the International Monetary Fund, but found they could not get one.

On the morning of the eighth day, the Cabinet met in the House of Commons. The Chancellor of the Exchequer, Harold Macmillan, who had been an enthusiast for Suez, told his colleagues that the pound would fall unless they stopped. That night the operation was called off. Eden soon resigned because of ill health and was succeeded by Macmillan.

That cautionary tale from recent history has relevance in Washington today. Not that the facts of our present crisis, or the power relationships, are at all the same. But in a more general sense the smell of Suez is in the air.

In Richard Nixon's Government, as in Anthony Eden's, an inner cabal of men ran important operations outside the normal processes of state. In secrecy they became increasingly arro-

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gant and unrealistic. In open crisis they continued stubbornly to resist reality. And in the end it may be the real world, the world of economics, that forces a change.

The dollar is now effectively undergoing its third devaluation in eighteen months. With currencies floating, that does not have the devastating psychological impact of the old days. But the nervousness is there, and there is no sign of an end.

The German bankers and French businessmen and the others who are unloading dollars are not radicals out to get President Nixon; even Senator Hugh Scott would have trouble finding such a conspiracy among them. They simply see the reality of Washington with the clarity of distance: they see that Watergate has virtually paralyzed the American Government,

and they understand how hard it will be for Richard Nixon to get it going again.

Today saw what could be the beginning of a genuine attempt by Mr. Nixon to adjust to the realities of his situation. Bringing Melvin Laird into the White House as counselor was a potent symbol of change.

Laird opposed the Christmas bombing of North Vietnam and was thought to be in bad grace with Mr. Nixon thereafter. More important, he is a Congressional man, as he emphasized in his first appearance before the press. It is most unlikely that he would stand still for continuation of the lawless notion that the President can exercise power in the absence of legislative or constitutional authority—whether the action is bombing a foreign country or setting up an illicit domestic security program.

But even Laird's best efforts are not going to make the fundamental problem go away in a hurry. That problem is the dark atmosphere of doubt surrounding this President.

Indeed, Laird inadvertently dramatized the painful nature of the situation when he was asked whether he had checked on the President's role in Watergate before taking the job. In the old days such a question would surely have been loftily dismissed. But Laird said: "I have been assured of his noninvolvement, and I accept that." He added that the Senate, the press and the prosecutors ought to carry on their search for the truth.

We can see no end now to these multiple inquiries. For months Senate committees and newspapers will be uncovering more gruesome details of domestic espionage, obstruction of justice and probably horrors as yet unimagined. It will be increasingly difficult for even the most detached observer to consider the President free of responsibility.

And the investigation by the special prosecutor, Archibald Cox, will be proceeding quietly on its own. Cox failed in his attempt to have the Senate hearings suspended because of the harm they may do to the search for truth. But he has made clear to some doubters that he has iron in him. He is not going to stand still for any obstruction from the White House, and in terms of concrete evidence his work could still be the most potent of all.

The fact that all these investigations are going on at once, and with so much publicity, outrages The Times of London, which protested in an editorial. The Times forgets that they are a balancing part of the American system. In Britain a Prime Minister who had done what Richard Nixon has already admitted doing in the name of "national security" would long since have been out of office.

If the cloud of doubt remains month after month, with its devastating effects on the world's confidence, then sooner or later Richard Nixon will have to face the question that the Eden Government faced in 1956. Some true friend and true conservative, we cannot yet know who, will come to him and say that for the country's good he must go.