

10, Post
5-17-73

David S. Broder

The Role Of President: Unchanged

This week should dispel some of the myths about what Watergate is doing to the American presidency.

It may be playing havoc with the political fortunes of Richard Nixon, but there is no evidence that it has reduced the essential authority of the office or the American people's habit of dependence on executive power.

When we turned on our television sets Wednesday night to see what our government would do to curb the new round of inflation, it was the President we found there—and no one else. No matter that Congress has the constitutional authority to legislate a wage-price freeze or any other remedy it wished to apply, and could have done so at any time in recent years. Congress left it to the President's discretion to act, and we—who are constituents of both Congress and the President—naturally assumed it was up to him to decide what was best.

Similarly, with the arrival of Soviet party chief Leonid Brezhnev in Washington, his negotiating partner will not be the Senate Foreign Relations Committee but the President of the United States. It apparently made no difference to Brezhnev that Mr. Nixon was in the midst of the biggest scandal in generations, or that his administration has been rocked to its heels. When you want to deal with the United States, you deal with the President.

On the big issues, domestic and foreign, the issues that decide whether it will be war or peace, prosperity or economic ruin, it is the President to whom everyone turns.

This is an important point to remember, because some folks have been bemused by Watergate into thinking that the presidency is going to be reduced in importance in the American scheme of government.

That is not going to happen. On the contrary, we ought to ponder the fact that we have all been sitting here this week, knowing full well that Mr. Nixon is in imminent danger of having his political legs cut from under him by the Watergate hearings, but nonetheless waiting passively and expectantly for the President of the United States to speak and act on our most important concerns. This freakish phenomenon ought to tell us something about the durability of our national dependence on presidential power.

This habit of dependence makes it wholly unrealistic to hope or believe we can significantly reduce the role of the Executive in our government or society.

Given a world in which the United States must continue to seek coherent policy answers to problems ranging from the energy crisis to the out-of-whack national and international economy to the political-military conflict for control of the Mideast and Southeast Asia, our sources of leadership are very few.

Congress can sometimes legislate broad remedies for certain domestic problems, as with medicare or the clean water and clean air acts. The ju-

*"On most large questions
confronting our country,
we will continue to turn
to the President for the
national policy response."*

diciary, as we saw in the last two decades, can sometimes move on issues of individual rights from which elected politicians shrink.

But on most large questions confronting our country, we will continue to turn to the President for the national policy response.

In this light, it is a matter of concern that too many of our recent Presidents—Hoover, Truman, Johnson and now Mr. Nixon—have found themselves politically crippled and unable to exert their proper authority in the closing years of their term. This problem is the other side of the coin of which so much is now being made—the problem of excessive abuse of presidential power, which we have also seen too often in recent years.

What we need to do is to discipline presidential power—to avoid the roller-coaster ride on which the modern presidents have taken us. We need, in George Reedy's useful word, to "stabilize" the presidency within our political system.

There are ways of doing this. But the first essential is to recognize the task for what it is—and not go flitting after the will-o'-the-wisp of thinking that America can be governed without a president.

This week should remind us that will not work.

Gov. Nelson A. Rockefeller's press secretary has taken issue with the statement in this column that "the New York governor has said nothing so far in defense of the President" on Watergate. He notes, as I should have, that Rockefeller joined in a statement by the Republican Governors Association last month, which said in part, "We deplore Watergate. We support the President. We believe the President. . . ."