

# The Sun King

By Anthony Lewis

LONDON, June 24—The American Presidency has grown so dramatically in power over this last generation in part because of the facts of international life. Leonid Brezhnev's visit to the United States has demonstrated as much.

No committee can negotiate for the United States with the other power capable of destroying mankind; only the President or his designee can speak with the necessary authority. Recognizing that, Senate leaders put aside even the compelling national interest in discovering the truth of the Watergate crimes to let President Nixon concentrate on his talks with Brezhnev.

From this episode one could conclude that realistically there can be no change in the now dominant role of the President. David Broder of The Washington Post has put it that, in domestic as in foreign affairs, "our national dependence on Presidential power" is likely to prove durable.

But the growth of Presidential power has causes other than the practical demands of contemporary government. There are elements in it of social decay, of atrophy in other institutions, of mystique. Perhaps if we recognize these origins, we may be able to prune back the dangerous excesses of power and leave what is irreplaceable in the Presidency.

A thoughtful comment on the causes of the trend toward centralization in the White House was made recently by Roger C. Cramton, a law professor who was a Justice Department official in the Nixon Administration and is now becoming the dean of the Cornell Law School.

"Much of the social comment that has held our society together," Professor Cramton wrote — "shared values,

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## AT HOME ABROAD

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strong family structure, the influence of the church and the local community — has been dissolving steadily over the years.

"Our pluralism, dispersion and isolation have gone so far that . . . the President is the one official who is sufficiently visible and universal to attract constant attention, provide leadership and serve as an emblem of what remains of our diminishing sense of community."

In healthy political development, the growth of new leadership in response to need is accomplished by mechanisms of restraint. In England the centralized power of monarch and prime minister has been moderated by the King's Council, Parliament, the Cabinet, the Civil Service.

It is in the development of such restraining political institutions that the United States has failed these last years. The courts and the press have often stood alone against an increasingly centralized authority unrestrained even by respect for law.

Watergate, whatever its eventual effect on the person of Richard Nixon, ought at a minimum to make Americans think afresh about the need for institutional restraints on the Presidency. Liberals most of all: for it was in the liberal years, beginning with Franklin Roosevelt, that we got into the habit of impatience with inhibitions on the President.

Congress is the institution that almost everyone now agrees must be strengthened—not to govern but to oversee government. But the rethinking must go beyond Congress.

It is time to make the Cabinet more meaningful in our Presidential politics. Its members can never have the individual political weight that they do in a parliamentary system, but we can demand that at least some be men and women of substance — people whom a President would scorn or dismiss at his peril. And if the White House staff is going to do more and more of the business of government, it must be held to higher standards.

But if we are to end the abuse of Presidential power, we shall have to look not only to the institutions but to ourselves as citizens. For we have glorified the man in the White House, made him our strange republican equivalent of a Sun King in Versailles.

Critics get letters from Americans who clearly think that, once elected, Our President should be beyond criticism. They want him to rule as if by divine right. They rest their own longings on him, their fate, in just the way that the King in Shakespeare's "Henry the Fifth" regretted:

*Upon the king! Let us our lives, our souls, our debts, our careful wives, our children, and our sins, lay on the king!*

When Thomas Jefferson had taken the inaugural oath in 1801, Dean Cramton reminds us, he walked back to his boarding house. He found the dining table full, so he waited for another boarder to finish and then took his place. Jefferson was a powerful President; but he was a human being, not a god.

Even in these days the President of the American Republic could seek his influence in moral authority and political legitimacy rather than in imperial remoteness. But it will be necessary for citizens to think of him again as one of them.