

Watergate: Mr. Nixon and the U.S. Will Survive

To the Editor:

Just back from a vacation in London, I was delighted to discover that my short June 12 essay on politics in Restoration England and the so-called Popish Plot had generated a small but impassioned reaction in the letters column. Unfortunately, some of the comments were more notable for their ardor than for their accuracy, hence this note to set the record straight.

George C. Lodge, with a viewpoint one would expect of a deep-dyed New England Brahmin, tells us that Charles II was a villain and the Earl of Shaftesbury was a hero. To each his own, but I suspect that Mr. Lodge has been the victim of too many hastily read nineteenth-century New England history books, a literary genre unrivaled for its extreme Whig bile and bias as well as its Puritan zeal.

Better-educated Whigs, including the great historian Macaulay, have generally agreed that Shaftesbury represented immorality and ruthlessness "in its most malignant type." Prof. J. H. Plumb, a modern scholar with no affection for any of the Stuarts (and some for Shaftesbury) has written that "he lied; he cheated. . . . He did not care if the innocent suffered. He was prepared to incite mobs, to exploit blind prejudice in order to further his

cause," and has described the "singularly serpentine quality" of his political career. So much for Mr. Lodge's hero.

The book-burning episode cited by Mr. Lodge was the work of the Doctors and Masters of Oxford University, by their decree of July 21, 1683, and not the work of King Charles. Whatever his failings—and he was the most mortal of men—Charles was a calm, tolerant leader whose cautious middle road between the extreme Cavaliers and the militant Roundheads and powerful economic oligarchs seeking to dominate Britain and run it as their private business concern was instrumental in sparing his people a second bloody civil war.

In this respect, the Restoration Settlement of 1660, and "Good King Charles' golden days" (as they have been dubbed in English lore) are as important a contribution to the peaceful evolution of constitutional government in the British Isles as the 1688 Settlement mentioned in several letters.

But, of course, the real parallel between Watergate and the Popish Plot has very little to do with the personalities involved. Rather, it lies in the way in which a scandal—partly true and partly false, but fanned to white heat by those who wanted to cripple or destroy the head of state—ran its course.

Despite the hysteria, the endless rumors and leaks and the unscrupulous efforts of powerful politicians like Shaftesbury and the London pamphleteers he guided, funded and provided material for, England and Charles II survived in peace. I expect that America and the President will do the same.

If I am wrong about this—and we should be sure in a year or two at most—I will make Mr. Lodge a gift of my best editions of Clarendon's "History" and Bishop Burnet's memoirs.

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