

Watergate and the 'Spirit of '76'

On July 3, 1971, at the National Archives where the Constitution and Bill of Rights are stored, Richard M. Nixon formally opened a five-year "Bicentennial Era." In a nationally televised address, Mr. Nixon called on the nation to maintain the "flaming idealism" of its early history. "Let it not be said of our America today," he declared, "that we were strong in arms and rich in goods but poor in spirit."

Today, only two years later, the spirit of Watergate hangs heavy over Mr. Nixon. His public credibility as a Bicentennial President calling the nation to its highest ideals seems open to serious question. Bicentennial planning at the national level has come to a virtual standstill. And there is precious little to show for the seven years of planning that preceded the current crisis.

Clearly, the Bicentennial was to be the capstone of the Nixon presidency. One nation, united under Richard Nixon in a year-long version of Honor America Day. Jack I. LeVant, the Bicentennial director who resigned last summer under fire, saw the Bicentennial as offering "the greatest opportunity Nixon, the party and the government has as a beacon of light for re-unification and light within the nation and within the world."

Now, it seems, Mr. Nixon's claim to the Spirit of '76 has been negated by Watergate—a scandal which has made the Bicentennial at once irrelevant and painfully relevant. On one level, the capital is so preoccupied with the unfolding of Watergate that preparations for the nation's 200th birthday have aroused little interest. On a deeper level, the Spirit of '76 is very much a part of the efforts by Congress, the courts and the press to shed light on what has been described as the darkest chapter in our political history. For this episode, with its components of espionage, sabotage, wiretapping, laundered campaign contributions and cover-ups, is clearly not what the founding fathers had in mind when they framed the Constitution and the Bill of Rights.

Although it was the Congress that created the American Revolution Bicentennial Commission in 1966, the Commission has been dominated by Presidential appointees. The Commission's job is to plan a commemoration with "special emphasis" on "the ideas associated with the Revolution." But documents made available to The Washington Post last summer disclosed "special emphasis" instead on politics, commercialism and flag-waving. The primary goal became the promotion of an undefined general concept called "Bicentennial awareness." The noncommittal slogan: "A past to honor, a future to mold."

The slogan fit in with two of

three broad themes adopted in 1970 by the Commission for the Bicentennial. They are Heritage '76 (history), Horizons '76 (the future) and Festival USA (fun and games). Neither the Commission nor its staff has been able to come up with details.

For a while, it looked as if there would at least be a Festival USA, first in the form of the Philadelphia Expo, which the Commission killed last May, then as 50 Bicentennial Parks, vetoed by the panel this May. Various investigative bodies have blamed bad leadership, lack of staff direction and the unwieldy nature of the 50-member commission for its lack of accomplishments.

After The Washington Post articles last summer, the Commission's funds were frozen while the House Judiciary Committee investigated the panel. Its conclusion was that the commission was incapable of planning a commemoration and needed a total overhaul. The White House was also dissatisfied, but from a different viewpoint. On February 1, Mr. Nixon proposed that the 50-member commission be replaced by an all-powerful administrator appointed by the President and confirmed by the Senate.

The President seemed to be following the advice of LeVant, the deposed Bicentennial director, who wrote more than a year earlier in a draft memorandum: "For the American Revolution Bicentennial Commission to be the success it can require that it must be a one-man show—the director must have full and complete authority with the full sanction of the President. Then and only then will his staff, aides and those below click heels and see that his (the President's) wishes are carried out. The present Commission structure must be defanged."

In its place, LeVant recommended a Bicentennial "czar," which David J. Mahoney, Bicentennial Commission chairman, later said was an "unfortunate" word description of the administrator the President eventually proposed.

Nevertheless, the proposed White House streamlining prompted one member of the present commission, Rep. Lawrence Williams (R-Pa.), to note angrily, "This bill commemorates the revolution to overthrow kings by establishing kings." The House Judiciary Committee, to whom Williams' remarks were directed, didn't buy the White House bill. Instead, in what some regarded as a mini-confrontation between the legislative and executive branches, it substituted its own. The House version makes the administrator subordinate to an 11-member policy board whose makeup does not automatically insure White House control. It also provides that the administrator

could not be the chairman. Recently, the House approved its own bill by an overwhelming margin. The Senate has yet to hold hearings on the matter.

Before the Watergate became a floodgate, the talk in Bicentennial circles was that the tangled commemoration could be straightened out and uplifted by placing a figure of major stature in the administrator's post. Speculation had included Jeb Stuart Magruder, since deeply implicated in the Watergate mess, John Connally and Ladybird Johnson. It is unlikely that the same names will resurface in this context. The search for a Bicentennial superstar will be difficult, not necessarily because he may have to answer to an 11-member policy board but because the "Nixon Bicentennial" no longer has the same authentic ring.

Outside the offices of the American Revolution Bicentennial Commission, however, much has been happening in the name of the Bicentennial. The Smithsonian and National Park Service are planning special events here in 1976. There are private Bicentennial groups of most ethnic and political colorations. There are 55 state and territorial Bicentennial commissions. In many places, the Bicentennial has become a political device for accomplishing a long list of languishing civic projects. Temple, Tex., population 35,000, wants to pave all its streets by 1976. Closer, perhaps, to the "ideas associated with the Revolution," the D.C. Bicentennial Commission has home rule as its major goal. In the commercial world, the inevitable deluge of Bicentennial products has begun and will grow to major proportions in three years.

So, as certain as tomorrow, a Bicentennial of sorts will take place—diffuse, disparate, grass roots, Establishment, high-minded and otherwise. It will be a do-your-own-thing affair. The supporters of the Articles of Confederation would have liked it that way.

Students of history, moreover, may find some comfort in this: The Centennial occurred at the end of the second scandal-ridden term of Ulysses S. Grant. The Republic survived.

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