

Points to Ponder on the Fourth

The one proposition upon which all Washington, and, I would guess, the whole country would agree is that we can be grateful this is not the year of our Bicentennial. It would be a little difficult, not to say hypocritical, to proclaim the success of the American experiment in this season of Watergate. Three years from now . . . who knows, our case may look better.

What we have come to understand—luckily, in time to purge ourselves of it—is that we have been governed by men who feared and distrusted the people they were supposed to be serving, the very people in whose name they exercised their great power.

Whether it was a President affronted by the sight of a single demonstrator in Lafayette Park or a White House underling enthusiastically compiling an "enemies' list," these men were determined to brook no opposition. It was their fear and their arrogance that led to the pattern of lawless, unconstitutional actions we have come to call Watergate.

It is not enough to rid ourselves of the perpetrators of these crimes. We must also purge ourselves of the error that confuses political opposition with disloyalty. We need to relearn our own democratic tradition and regain the habits of freedom and dissent which these men sought so ruthlessly to suppress.

Here, in the spirit of the Independence Day holiday, are three brief thoughts to ponder:

The first, from a Founding Father: "I tolerate with the utmost latitude the right of others to differ from me in opinion without imputing to them criminality. I know too well the weakness and uncertainty of human reason to wonder at its different results. Both of our political parties, at least the

"We must also purge ourselves of the error that confuses political opposition with disloyalty."

honest part of them, agree conscientiously in the same object—the public good; but they differ essentially in what they deem the means of promoting that good . . .

"Which is right, time and experience will prove . . . With whichever opinion the body of the nation concurs, that must prevail. My anxieties on this subject will never carry me beyond the use of fair and honorable means, of truth and reason; nor have they ever lessened my esteem for moral worth, nor alienated my affections from a single friend, who did not first withdraw himself from me."

The second passage, by a 20th-century philosopher, is this: "If we are to preserve democracy, we must understand its principles. And the principle which distinguishes it from all other forms of government is that in a democracy the opposition not only is tolerated as constitutional but must be maintained because it is in fact indispensable . . . For in making the great experiment of governing people by consent rather than by coercion, it is not sufficient that the party in power should have a majority. It is just as necessary . . . that it must listen to the minority and be moved by the minority. . . .

"A good statesman, like any other sensible human being, always learns more from his opponents than from his fervent supporters. For his supporters will push him to disaster un-

less his opponents show him where the dangers are. So if he is wise, he will often pray to be delivered from his friends, because they will ruin him. But, though it hurts, he ought also to pray never to be left without opponents; for they keep him on the path of reason and good sense."

The third, and final text, by a contemporary political leader, is this: "A politician knows that his friends are not always his allies, and that his adversaries are not his enemies. A politician knows how to make the process of democracy work, and loves the intricate workings of the democratic system. . . .

"A politician knows that his words are his weapons, but that his word is his bond. A politician knows that only if he leaves room for discussion and room for concession can he gain room for maneuver.

"A politician knows that the best way to be a winner is to make the other side feel it does not have to be a loser. And a politician . . . knows both the name of the game and the rules of the game, and he seeks his ends through the time-honored democratic means."

The first passage comes from Thomas Jefferson, the author of the Declaration, in an 1804 letter to Abigail Adams. The second is from Walter Lippmann's 1939 essay "The Indispensable Opposition."

And the third passage, interestingly, is from Richard M. Nixon's eulogy of Everett M. Dirksen on Sept. 9, 1969.

Had the men in power understood and heeded those thoughts, this would have been a happier 197th birthday of the Republic. Perhaps by 1976, we will have found leaders who grasp their meaning and give more than lip service to keeping them alive.