

Scruple And Stupidity

By Anthony Lewis

LONDON, July 11—This is a tale of two Englishmen and their reactions to Watergate.

They are Establishment figures in the good sense: well-educated, sensitive to history, exercising influence with a strong sense of responsibility. Family and professional connections both have given them wide acquaintance on the Continent and in the United States. In the past both thought well of President Nixon.

One is a Government official, the other a banker. Each is regarded in his field as one of the outstanding men of the generation just reaching power. Their professions are hardly given to overstatement, but they did not try to conceal the strength of their feelings when asked about Watergate.

"What we know this Administration did," the official said, "showed an extraordinary combination of insensitivity, lack of moral scruple and stupidity. What is one to make of a Government like that?"

"The contempt it has shown for its own society inevitably raises questions about its attitude in foreign relations. Of course in foreign affairs one is governed by self-interest. But what is so disturbing is the total failure of these people to understand their self-interest."

He paused and then spoke more personally.

"There are many of us," he said, "especially here in Britain, who were brought up to respect the United States—to love it, really—as the leader of the free world. You even led us Europeans to do things we ought to have done on our own. You claimed leadership not just because of your power but because you were a moral nation. And however much some peo-

AT HOME ABROAD

ple scoffed, that claim to moral rectitude was accepted.

"For years now, since General de Gaulle started it, there has been a new skepticism about American motives and the American Government's will or ability to fulfill its promises. My colleagues and I have been holding out against that view, successfully until now. I doubt that we can any more."

Like most of his British colleagues, the official has broadly admired the Nixon foreign policy. But now he thinks it will meet deep skepticism. If there is a new agreement with the Soviet Union, he said, people will look at the President's political motives. If he restates the U.S. defense commitment to Western Europe, they will wonder about his ability to maintain that line in Congress.

■

When the United States cut off soybean exports, he said, a French official said in dead earnest that there was a secret deal to send the bean crop to Russia. The Briton said he no longer felt able to scoff at such conspiratorial talk. At the least he wondered about the disregard for international needs and expectations shown in that sudden embargo.

And even apart from skeptical feelings, the official asked, how can one do serious business with a White House preoccupied by Watergate? Suppose President Nixon makes his planned trip to Europe later this year: It will be regarded by most of the host governments as an unavoidable duty, not a hopeful opportunity to remold Atlantic relationships.

What then can change the situation? the official was asked. He shook his head and said he saw nothing really, short of the President's resignation from office. Otherwise the next three years were going to be very hard in the West: "It is a matter of confidence."

■

The banker used that same word, confidence, and came to the same conclusion. He spoke more abruptly. His message was simply that he did not believe the dollar could really be stabilized, and with it the whole monetary system, so long as Nixon remained President.

Striking as that view may seem in a British banker, it is not a solitary one here. The monetary commentator of *The Financial Times*, C. Gordon Tether, wrote the other day:

"The light thrown on the Administration's way of life by the undisputed parts of the testimony given to the Senate inquiry is persuading more and more observers that . . . only clear proof that something akin to a spiritual rebirth is taking place in the Presidential office will now suffice to halt the catastrophic decline in confidence in the dollar before it brings the rest of the international monetary house down."

It may seem odd when officials and financial men on this side of the Atlantic talk about lack of moral scruple in the White House, or the need for a "spiritual rebirth" there. But the hard-headed men who say those things know that they and their country have a stake in the reputation of the American Government. And they understand what is involved in restoring confidence.