

The State of the President—and the Presidency

On the occasion of his return to the White House after a bout with pneumonia at Bethesda Naval Hospital, the President gave us some interesting insights on his state of health and mind. In his remarks on Friday to assembled staff members, he told us, for example, that he won't obey his doctors' orders to slow down and relax because "the health of a man is not nearly as important as the health of a nation and the health of the world." He is going to go "full tilt all of the way," and he was not saying it "heroically" but simply because that's how it is when you are President. He has been "amused" by the suggestion of "some very well-intentioned people" (who they may be, and in what position of responsibility, he didn't say) that he resign, but he didn't sound entirely amused as he dismissed that idea as "just plain poppycock." He went on to try to put into perspective "the things we see on television," by which he was presumably referring to John Mitchell and John Dean III and (coming this week) John Ehrlichman and H. R. Haldeman and a lot of other people who used to hold the same positions of high trust and close confidence now held by some of those who gathered to welcome his return.

The proper way to think about these "things we see on television," the President said, is *not* to think about them. Instead we are to think "of the ages" and of "the whole world and not just our own little world" and of "the nation and not only our little part of the nation." When you think big like that, he suggested, then you realize there are "great decisions" to be made in his office about peace and crime and drug control and, also, "battles" to be won "to provide a fair and better opportunity for all Americans." That is what "we were elected overwhelmingly to carry forward," he said—with no discernible sense of awareness that a goodly number of the "we" he alluded to could not be on hand for the occasion because of the way they conducted his re-election campaign and the way they managed the government's business in the four preceding years.

"Let others wallow in Watergate," he concluded. "We are going to do our job."

There are several things, both good and bad, about this seemingly impromptu but, one would assume, thoroughly calculated report on what might be called the State of the President—head down, and charging *away* from the Watergate wallow, off in seemingly high-minded pursuit of a generation of peace without inflation or unemployment or escalating crime rates or anything disagreeable of that sort. The good part is that Mr. Nixon is apparently restored to sound health and more than ready to get back on the job. The bad part is that after 10 days of resting, sleeping and thinking, as he put it, he still does not appear to comprehend the urgent priorities and imperatives which the Watergate revelations have imposed upon the job. He gives not the slightest sign of understanding what Watergate, in all its tawdry and demoralizing details, has done to the state of his presidency.

Does he not accept, for example, the findings of the polls that more than two-thirds of the public which elected him so overwhelmingly now believes that he had something to do with the so-called coverup—something to do, that is, with a criminal conspiracy, a *felony*? Will no one in his present entourage dare tell him what this has done to the state of mind, not of his natural opponents, but of his natural constituency, in terms of the respect and support which is fundamental to the effective functioning of the presidency?

Can he truly believe that while he was away "all the

work was being done, that everything that needed to be done for this country was going forward"? Does he not know that for some weeks now, beginning long before his illness, there has been solid evidence of inertia, uncertainty, suspicion and an almost crippling absence of strong leadership and effective management throughout his government?

Is it that he once again can find no clue to all this in his administration's dealings with Congress and with foreign governments? Is there nobody around him, once again, who can break through this apparent wall of isolation and confront the President with the harsh truths that are now being spoken of openly by those around him?

It hardly seems possible that the President can be that much out of touch. A more rational explanation is that he intends to ride rough-shod over the realities, on the assumption that he will be saved by another statistic in the polls that shows that less than 20 per cent of the public is prepared to face up to the unknown, unprecedented and unhinging trauma that would be involved in the removal, by impeachment or resignation, of an incumbent president. This may be a reasonable assumption. But it is also a prescription for no more than survival. It almost certainly is not a strategy calculated to accomplish the one purpose that is basic to all others—the restoration of the prestige and influence and respect of the presidency.

That is what the President seems least to understand: that he cannot get where he says he wants to go without joining the rest of us, so to speak, in what he chooses to dismiss as the Watergate wallow. It is, after all, *his* wallow, created in his name and by his men, and it has spread so far and grown so huge that he can no longer hope to run away from it, or around it, if he truly means to recover what he professes to want most: the capacity to make the best of the rest of his final term. What we mean by this is not that the President join in morbid preoccupation with the Watergate hearings or engage in point-by-point rebuttals issued by his subordinates. What is required would take little of his time away from the "great decisions," for what is required is simply that he speak directly and persuasively to the public doubts and uncertainties—that at least once he step forward and make his best case, clearly, comprehensively and conclusively, without the protection of executive privilege and separation of powers and all the other instruments of coverup. We now know that all along he has had—in taped recordings of his conversations—important evidence bearing directly on charges made against him of involvement in the associated crimes and improprieties that are known as Watergate. And this fact, the President must recognize, has profoundly transformed the argument over what he now can reasonably be expected to do on his own behalf.

We would have no way of knowing whether the evidence in the tapes would be conclusive, one way or the other. But that is a chance well worth taking; it seems to us. For the alternative—the continued suppression of this evidence and the President's continued contempt for the Watergate proceedings—is almost certainly guaranteed to generate speculations, compound doubts and encourage suspicions which could increasingly and conclusively cripple his capacity to run the government. When that is the choice—and when you consider the current state of the presidency as distinct from that of the President—it does not seem too much to ask that he give us all the evidence bearing on his case.