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The President's Capacity to Govern

The question of the impact of Watergate on Mr. Nixon's capacity to govern is becoming sharper and rawer and presumably will become more so as long as the President fails to address himself head-on to the miasma of doubts and allegations concerning his own role. Many share this judgment but the telling thing is that it is no longer held exclusively or principally, if it ever was, by those Mr. Nixon chooses to regard as his "enemies." It is now the judgment of some of his own closest aides—those most concerned with the success of his presidency and, therefore, those likely to be most sensitive to the obstacles which the larger Watergate phenomenon has placed in his path.

Now, we grant it is hard to isolate those qualities and conditions of leadership which constitute a "capacity to govern." A President with such a capacity can produce what some will regard as bad policy—or even a policy to do nothing. A President without it can strive to conceal its absence with a flurry of meetings, papers, messages, reassurances, announcements and proposals. Yet few close students of government would deny there is such a thing as an incapacity to govern effectively. It means, among other things, that a President, when he speaks, cannot be sure of a careful hearing from his supporters, let alone from his rivals. It means that he cannot be expected, out of his political incapacity, to bring to bear the full range of legitimate powers of his office—that he cannot mobilize his party or his supporters; that he cannot deal productively with his opponents, that he cannot reach out for reinforcement from the public on behalf of his policies and programs. It means that he cannot attract to his service ambitious and able men and secure their working loyalty—a risky word perhaps in these times but a necessary concept—to help him accomplish the larger purposes for which he presumably took office himself. It means that foreign governments will not accept that when they deal with him they are dealing with that substantial ongoing entity, the government of the United States. It means, in a word, that people do not take him seriously.

We would not claim that by each of these tests Mr. Nixon's presidency has been irretrievably devalued. Indeed, in respect to one of them, the quality of men he has recently established in key jobs—we have in mind, among others, Melvin R. Laird, Elliot L. Richardson, James R. Schlesinger—he may stand higher than ever. Look closely, though, at the over-all judgments offered by Mr. Nixon's own men.

His former top domestic adviser, John Ehrlichman, has acknowledged in an interview that Watergate has had "an immediate impact in weakening his clout with Congress—that's been observable." Mr. Nixon would have vetoed three appropriations bill which he signed, Mr. Ehrlichman suggested, "if he had been in the same relative strength position with the Congress as he was in February." Efforts by Melvin Laird, who replaced Mr. Ehrlichman, to revive the principles of the administration's family assistance plan seem doomed. Indeed,

Mr. Laird is said to be considering resigning because he has been unable to achieve the personal access to the President or the "opening" of the administration which were his reasons for joining Mr. Nixon's staff. Whether Mr. Nixon has the influence to secure legislation to carry forward his New Federalism program, which was in trouble anyway, is an open question. Appropriations, welfare reform, New Federalism—we are speaking of the central domestic issues of the presidency of a man who told the American people, in a speech in 1968, that he was seeking the office "not because the presidency offers a chance to *be* somebody, but because it offers a chance to *do* something. Today, it offers a greater opportunity to help shape the future than ever before in the nation's history. And if America is to meet its challenges, the next President must seize that opportunity."

In foreign affairs, the situation is hardly different. A few days ago a distinguished gentleman who was identified as "official sources" conceded to newsmen that Watergate had cost the Chief Executive congressional consent for indefinite bombing in Cambodia. This apparently will mean that one principal purpose of Mr. Nixon's various secret and public attacks on Cambodia over the last four years—to destroy the Cambodian sanctuaries—is on the verge of being wiped out. In Mr. Nixon's own terms, this is a staggering loss. Dr. Henry Kissinger, chief White House national security adviser, offers an even broader judgment in the current *Newsweek*: "Is it possible to insulate foreign policy from the general difficulties we are facing as a nation? I don't know the answer, but that is the question that torments me." Dr. Kissinger fears, his interviewers report, that the domestic support and foreign respect needed for a successful foreign policy are in jeopardy. Many others share his fears. Again, we are speaking of perhaps the central ambition of the Nixon presidency, of what the candidate himself described in 1968 as "this honor—this destiny—that beckons America, the chance to lead the world at last out of turmoil and onto that plateau of peace man has dreamed of since the dawn of time."

Mr. Nixon noted in the same 1968 speech: "Theodore Roosevelt called the presidency 'a bully pulpit'; Franklin Roosevelt called it 'preeminently a place of moral leadership.' And surely one of a President's greatest resources is the moral authority of his office." We could not agree more, and we believe it to be central to any discussion of the President's capacity to govern that, by the latest Gallup poll, three of four Americans believe that Mr. Nixon was involved to some degree in Watergate, and the number of those who believe he should be compelled to leave office has risen since late June from 18 per cent to 24 per cent. In the last analysis, these are the indices, reflecting public respect as well as support, that define the authority of a President and, in turn, determine his capacity to govern.