

Beyond Watergate

By William V. Shannon

WASHINGTON, July 26—Three years ago, John N. Mitchell, then the Attorney General and President Nixon's closest political adviser, was overheard to say at a cocktail party: "This country is going so far right you are not even going to recognize it."

There is a faint uneasiness in the Washington political community that the eventual public reaction to Watergate may yet prove Mr. Mitchell right. The disgust at the secret goings-on inside the Nixon Administration now being revealed and the further decline in popular faith in the nation's political and social institutions may have incalculable political consequences.

In conventional political logic, since Watergate is a scandal of a right-wing Republican administration, it ought to lead to a swing to the Democrats at the next election and, perhaps, a revival in the power of the once-dominant moderate Eastern faction of the G.O.P.

Instead, however, there may only be a deepening apathy and cynicism, a growing conviction that neither major party and no conventional politician can be trusted. In those circumstances, popular support could grow for Gov. George C. Wallace, an unorthodox politician who stands "outside the system" and thrives by attacking both major parties. Or, alternatively, a figure from outside of politics, a "general on a white horse" perhaps, might emerge as the next President.

A nation can probably only withstand so many shocks to its basic beliefs about itself before it passes some invisible breaking point and gives way to despair. F. Scott Fitzgerald, writing of individuals rather than of nations, observed: "The man-

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ner remains intact long after the morale has cracked." Is it possible that America's buoyant democratic morale may soon crack and the desperate search for a hero-savior-dictator figure begin?

Human history certainly provides abundant evidence to make this gloomy scenario plausible. Despite our fortunate history, as a people, Americans are not immune to the political costs and consequences of a huge military establishment, of covert methods of diplomacy and counterintelligence, of inflation and rising public debt, of political corruption.

There is only one ultimate defense against the coming to power of a sinister demagogue or a military dictator and the consequent destruction of the people's liberties. That defense is wide and deep popular understanding of those liberties and their significance. In this context, the Senate Watergate hearings are a valuable instrument of public education.

In their diversity, their common sense, and their capacity to phrase an issue in terms that everyone can understand, the seven members of the Senate Watergate committee are a credit to the often-maligned profession of politics.

Senator Sam Ervin, of course, has moved in a few months from a respected but little-known member of the Senate to a national folk hero. His popularity is deserved. He has a good lawyer's grasp of the issues and he has an astute politician's skill in dramatizing them.

As his eyebrows waggle and his jowls shake and his voice stammers a bit, "Mr. Sam" gives a delightful human dimension to the precious constitutional wisdom he dispenses almost daily. His Biblical quotations are frequently so apt that he may bring Bible-reading back into fashion. Citing what he called "a little of the Bible, a little of history and a little of the law," Senator Ervin on Wednesday delivered a moving and cogent homily about the rights of the citizens and the limits of a President's power.

He recalled the origins in British experience of the constitutional barrier against the government intruding on a man's home or office. He quoted the magnificent words of William Pitt the elder that begin: "The poorest man in his cottage may bid defiance to all the forces of the Crown."

Senator Ervin added: "And yet we are told here today that what the King of England can't do, the President of the United States can."

He then recalled the attempt of the Lincoln Administration to suspend some constitutional guarantees during the exigencies of the Civil War, and he found the exactly right quotation from Mr. Justice Davis in *ex parte* Milligan condemning that attempt: "No doctrine involving more pernicious consequences was ever invented by the wit of man than that any of its [the Constitution's] provisions can be suspended during any of the great exigencies of government."

No one hearing this Ervin homily could ever forget the importance of the Fourth Amendment or the danger in giving any President, no matter how well-motivated, power outside the law. In effect, the nation is going to school and taking a televised course in the rudiments of self-government. If the lessons are well and truly learned by all of us, then the republic may emerge shaken but stronger from the storms of Watergate.