

Watergate: The Cambodian Connection

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. Henry Kissinger, in an interview in Newsweek, July 30, 1973.

What Dr. Kissinger is really asking, we assume, is not whether there is a natural, inescapable connection between the capacity of a president to do business abroad effectively and his capacity to deal with a profound challenge to his authority and prestige and influence at home, for of this there can be little doubt. What is tormenting Dr. Kissinger, we suspect, is whether President Nixon, in his particular circumstances, is going to be able to find it possible to work free from the awful encumbrance of Watergate in a way which will restore his capacity to conduct the business of government effectively, either at home or abroad. And the short answer to that question, in our view, is no—not the way he is going about it now.

We would offer in evidence, as Exhibit A, his toast to the Emperor of Japan at a state dinner the other night. That he would take this occasion as a vehicle for communicating to the American electorate, on the subject of Watergate, says something in itself about his ability to “insulate foreign policy from the general difficulties we are facing as a nation,” but never mind; he provided his Japanese visitors with an astonishingly candid assessment of what was so profoundly wrong about the first four and a half years of the Nixon presidency:

After our short time on this great world stage is completed, and we leave, what do we leave? Do we leave the memory only of the battles we have fought, of the opponents we did in, of the viciousness that we created, or do we leave possibly not only the dream but the reality of a new world . . . ?

Battles fought, opponents done in, viciousness created—that pretty well defines the spirit and the misplaced emphasis with which the Nixon administration has approached the conduct of government. But when the President gets around to dealing with the consequences, he offers not the slightest evidence that he is aware of the damage that has already been done to him by what has been revealed before the Ervin committee and elsewhere about the conduct, character and cast of mind of his administration with respect to that ever-enlarging collection of crimes and improprieties that have come to be called Watergate.

Item:

Let others spend their time dealing with the murky, small, unimportant vicious little things. We have spent our time and will spend our time in building a better world.

And again:

We have our faults, just as every nation has its faults, but our total dedication at this time in our history is toward using our great material resources and our emotional resources and our intellectual resources toward really building a better world and not let ourselves be remembered only for the petty, little indecent things that seem to obsess us at a time when the world is going by.

If that is really how Mr. Nixon appraises his own predicament—if he honestly believes it is comparable to the transitory “domestic controversies” that troubled President Eisenhower, as he also said the other night—then there is solid basis for Dr. Kissinger’s torment. For the evidence is everywhere of the interconnection between the President’s failure to deal forcefully and forthrightly with Watergate and his capacity to govern all across the board. It can be read in congressional votes, in conversation with foreign diplomats, in the polls. But nothing better illustrates it than the collapse of the United States government’s ability to affect the outcome of events in Cambodia. For this proceeded as a direct result of the collapse of the President’s influence with Congress on the question of his authority

to continue bombing Cambodia after August 15. And this in turn derived in full measure from the damage that had been done to the President’s authority as a consequence of Watergate.

Thus, the President, on the one hand, is entirely entitled to hold Congress accountable for whatever “dangerous potential consequences” may be in store for Cambodia or South Vietnam. But, in practical terms of political cause and effect, it is equally true that he has himself largely to blame for the loss of a congressional mandate for his Indochina policy. And it is in this other, and quite valid, sense that Cambodia can be put down as the first demonstrable international casualty of Watergate.

There is a terrible irony in this, when you think

about it, for the Cambodian connection with Watergate only ends with the events of recent weeks. A solid case can be made that it began with the President’s decision in 1969 to conduct clandestine, unacknowledged, bombing raids against the Cambodian sanctuaries as a cover for the withdrawal of American troops from South Vietnam—even as he was proclaiming in public our solemn respect for Cambodian neutrality. It was partly in response to newspaper accounts of this covert assault on Cambodia, by the President’s own account, that he established his own private para-police force to plug the leaks. From these so-called “plumbers,” in turn, we got the Ellsberg burglary. From the failure of the bombing to wipe out the sanctuaries and the subsequent “incursion” of Cambodia by American forces, we also got the worst of the anti-war protests and the worst of the clandestine and admittedly illegal searches and surveillances and other countermeasures that are now being described in such lurid detail in the Senate Caucus Room. There is, in short, a very real relationship between breaking and entering with B52s into Cambodia and breaking and entering with hired burglars into the office of Daniel Ellsberg’s psychiatrist—between the furtive, unconventional, extralegal approaches which President Nixon applied to foreign policy and the application of the same methods and the same crude disregard for traditional values and proprieties in his conduct of government and his practice of politics.

We do not mean to suggest that the same sort of men or precisely comparable methods were necessarily involved in foreign policy, on the one hand, and in the re-election of the President on the other. We merely mean that the excesses and abuses in both activities are the logical consequences of a common standard of behavior: that both are inextricably entwined, not only in literal causal terms but with respect to their essential character. And that, it seems to us, is what some of even the best men now around Mr. Nixon have not yet come to recognize. Consider, by way of example, the response the other day of Secretary of Defense James R. Schlesinger, when he was asked about the analogy between Watergate and the Cambodian bombing and its subsequent cover-up with false reports. The Cambodian affair, he replied, is “entirely different from Watergate. There was no attempt whatsoever to keep the information from the top. In fact, the entire chain of command responded to directives from the top . . . and the major difference between this and the Watergate affair, I should emphasize, is that serious crimes have been charged with the Watergate affair, where in this case it is a question of what is advisable from the standpoint of the national interest.”

Well, the first thing to be said about this is that a good number of the worst Watergate "crimes" were apparently committed in the name of "the national interest" and "national security." John Ehrlichman defended the Ellsberg burglary in just those terms; John Mitchell proclaimed the re-election of President Nixon as an overriding national priority justifying just about anything. As to the question of how close to the "top" the commands came from, there may not be all that much to choose between a broad, initial presidential commitment to clear out the Cambodian sanctuaries by whatever means, and a general presidential directive to do whatever it takes to plug leaks or to gather political intelligence or to confine the investigation of the break-in at the Watergate; in any case, the precise degree of the President's knowledge of, and involvement in, the details of the Watergate crimes, after all, is a large part of what the Ervin committee hearings are all about.

So we think it is a grave mistake for the President and the men now around him to try to set to one side, as a passing aberration, something that has become, in the Nixon administration, very nearly a way of life; or to pretend that Watergate has not been all encompassing in terms of the spirit that animated it; or to delude themselves that its consequences are somehow unconnected with the President's capacity to run the government. For it does not work that way. On the contrary, it is almost axiomatic that for as long as Mr. Nixon refuses to deal squarely with Watergate as *his* responsibility and *his* failure, and as something that cannot be waved out of sight, those domestic resources he speaks of—material, emotional and intellectual—are not going to be readily available for him to draw upon for his larger, global purposes; and still less for the purpose of making good on the ominous threats, in his letter to Congress last week, of some unspecified retaliation against further North Vietnamese violations of the Indochina cease-fire. That much, at the very least, would seem to us to be the clear meaning for the President of the Cambodian connection to Watergate.