

Public Found Disillusioned By the Watergate Scandal

*Survey Shows Complacency Jarred by
Senate Hearing and a Wide Loss
of Confidence in the President*

By STEVEN V. ROBERTS

Alexander and Betty Bennett were shepherding two children and a shopping cart through a supermarket in the Carrick section of Pittsburgh, an aging neighborhood of modest homes and hard-working people, the kind of place where words such as patriotism and law and order still hold deep meaning.

When they were asked for their reactions to the Watergate affair, Mrs. Bennett replied with a certain sadness:

"I wanted to feel that the President didn't know, but I know that's not true. I truly feel he knew, and it hurts me. You like to think that your leader is honest and upright, flawless, A-1. When you find out he's not—especially when he's got your life in his hands—it makes you feel terrible."

Her remarks reflected a widely held attitude that emerged from hundreds of interviews across the country by

New York Times correspondents seeking to gauge the public impact of Watergate. The survey was completed last week. Subsequent reports that Vice President Agnew is under investigation for possible criminal misconduct could be expected only to reinforce the basic impression: The Watergate scandal is hurting President Nixon — badly.

Undoubtedly, many people are bored by the Senate hearings which recessed last Tuesday. Others feel that dirty tricks are as much a part of politics as campaign promises, and that the Republicans "just happened to get caught." Moreover, a sizable group believes that the President has handled himself well, that his critics have failed to make their case, and that the country should move on to more im-

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The New York Times/Gary Haynes
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portant matters.

But that seems to be a minority view. The President's refusal to turn over tapes and records of White House conversations is widely interpreted as an admission of guilt. Many people feel that they have been lied to consistently, and treated like "fools." They no longer know whom to believe.

In Pittsburgh, Mr. Bennett, a policeman who said he did not cast a vote for President last year, said, "Ever since I was a little kid, I was taught respect for the President and the country."

Now, he said, he finds that respect eroding. He told of arresting several teen-agers recently who said to him: "Why are you picking on me? The President is corrupt; he steals. I just don't. I don't have the mone to back me up."

With a shrug, Mr. Bennett added: "What answer do you have for them?"

Most Americans are still quick to call their country the "greatest in the world," but for many a certain innocence has ended. Like the Bennetts, they want to be proud of their country and its leaders, they want to believe all those shining words they learned as "little kids." But now they have doubts. Their faith has been shaken.

The basic problem is a loss of confidence, an uneasy feeling that things are just not right.

"It's unbelievable that something like this should happen in our country, we're supposed to be so great," said Mrs. Kathy Vierra, who works in an electronics plant in Concord, Calif. "No one trusts anyone else in Washington. It makes me feel so unprotected. Things aren't as steady and sound as I thought, they're kind of crumbling apart."

"I'm frightened," added a Westchester woman, the wife of a corporation executive. "We're all so complacent. If this can happen, what can happen next?"

Inflation Hurts Many

One thing happening is inflation, and this is only compounding the loss of confidence in the Administration. One hears cracks about "Republican prosperity," and many agree with the construction worker in Pittsburgh who voted for President Nixon last year and now says:

"I'll never vote for another Republican as long as I live. They all follow the same pattern, the rich get richer and the poor get poorer."

The biggest reason people give for backing President Nixon last year is that he was "the lesser of two evils." Thus his public support may be much thinner than the election results would indicate. Art Hag-enbaumer, a retired welder in Concord, said:

"Nixon's a little tin god. He's got the idea that people voted for him, but they didn't. They were against the Democrats. They weren't for Nixon."

Accordingly, the Gallup Poll now shows that only 40 per cent of the people approve of the way President Nixon is handling his job, a drop of 28 points since January, the largest six-month decline in the history of the poll.

Interviews in Six Areas

A telephone poll of 529 people conducted last week for A.B.C. News showed 34 per cent felt that the President was doing a poor job, 27 per cent said he was doing a fair job, 21 per cent said he was doing a good job, and 10 per cent gave him an excellent rating.

In an attempt to flush out these figures, The Times selected six areas of the country for interviews: Concord, a middle-class suburb east of San Francisco Bay; Sterling, Colo., a farming and ranching town near the Nebraska border; Woodlawn, a black ghetto in Chicago; Carrick, the urban, working-class district on the south side of Pittsburgh; the wealthy, Republican area near the Westchester Country Club in Harrison, N.Y.; and Chattanooga, Tenn., a middle-sized Southern city just across the line from Georgia.

One large group of voters was not very surprised by the whole commotion. "It's all a big joke, a waste of manpower and money," said Jim Lock, a plumber in Sterling, as he attended a family picnic in the city park. "It's come out in the open—we have crooks for

leaders—but most of us knew that already."

Others are merely bored and confused. As John Davidson, editor of The Concord Transcript, said: "The feeling I get is that people would like to see it over and done with. They're suffering from a sensory overload, they're freaking out on Watergate and don't want to deal with it."

And many shared the frustration of Betty Baldacci, wife of a Concord building contractor, who complained: "The witnesses are very intelligent, their footwork is beautiful, but I certainly couldn't tell who was telling the truth."

Bias Is Charged

This restlessness has clearly helped President Nixon. "The Government is spending all its time on Watergate and there are more important things going on," said a bookkeeper shopping in a Sterling clothing store. "You can't get meat, you can't get gas, and what you can get, you can't afford."

"Let's get the show on the road," added Ray Dollerschell, the store owner. "How can the man continue to be President under this kind of pressure? Let's get off his back and go to work."

To some, the investigation has not only been too long, but too partisan, a "vindictive" attempt to "destroy" President Nixon.

James Connors, a Westchester lawyer, declared:

"The hearings are very political, and I think the chairman [Senator Sam J. Ervin Jr., Democrat of North Carolina] is very anti-Nixon. I don't think the criticisms against him [the President] have much basis in fact. There's a lot of hearsay, and those who are leveling them are either politically motivated or out to save their own skins."

Reservoir of Favor

President Nixon seems to enjoy a large reservoir of goodwill for ending the war in Vietnam and making new contacts with China and Russia,

and only in the South are his foreign policy initiatives criticized as "helping the Communists."

Some are still willing to accept his justifications for keeping Watergate quiet. "There probably are things we shouldn't know about," said Noel Looney, an electrician, as he ate lunch in a Concord coffee shop. "Maybe some things are beyond our capacity to understand. That's why we elected these people, they're supposed to be smarter than we are."

The strongest factor in the President's favor is that many people want so desperately to believe him.

"I hope Nixon is not involved, I like to think the President of the United States is above things like that," said Rich Hehman, a disabled veteran, at a Pittsburgh shopping center.

But the survey indicates that fewer and fewer people are willing to say that the President "knows best." Despite the widespread boredom and confusion over the Senate hearings, most people have some opinion. And probably the most pervasive one is that President Nixon, and his chief advisers, knew about Watergate long before the facts became public.

Few know the details of the allegations—who said what to whom and when. But their common sense tells them that many witnesses are lying. Donna Morris of Pittsburgh, the wife of a vending machine mechanic, voted for President Nixon last fall and now says:

"I just think the whole thing is really outrageous. According to some of those witnesses, nobody is guilty! I just don't believe the man could not know. And if he didn't know, well, that's a heck of a President!"

During the campaign last year, so many voters were frightened of Senator George McGovern, the Democratic nominee, that they tended to forget President Nixon's reputation. Now he is again "Tricky Dick."

Still, the President was apparently holding his own until last month. Then he refused to hand over the tapes and records of White House conversations, and for many, the clouds of confusion cleared. They came to a simple conclusion: He had to be hiding something.

For a sizable majority of those interviewed, "executive privilege" and "separation of powers" are pure gibberish. They tend to agree with Mi-

chael Jones, a Concord carpenter who balanced his infant son in his arms and said: "I think that the way he is hiding, he's already making himself guilty. I feel that he's been pretty sneaky about the whole thing."

Diana Nicola, a young mother in Chattanooga, voted for the President last year. "I wouldn't vote for him again," she says now. "He shouldn't care for them to hear the tapes if they cleared his name. I didn't think he was guilty till then, but now I think he is."

Another factor undermining confidence in the President is the public money spent on his homes in California and Florida. Like the tapes, it is an issue people can easily understand.

"Why are our taxes going up and up and up? So he can fix up his home?" fumed Marie Hagenbaumer, a part-time domestic. "I have to fix mine up one dollar at a time, and I can't take it off my taxes."

A lot of this comes down to a rather elementary egalitarianism. Many voters disliked Senator McGovern because they felt his welfare proposals would give certain groups something for nothing. Now they are turning against President Nixon out of a similar sense of unfairness and outrage.

People across the country echoed the thoughts of Aaron Motton, who works in a Chicago aluminum plant: "When you can't believe in the President and the people who run the country, you lose faith. You don't know who to believe in."

This failure to set high moral standards bothers parents such as Judith Bell, the wife of a photographer in Concord, who have to teach their children.

"My son is 16," she said. "He sits and watches the hearings and shakes his head. What are kids this age going to think? How can they have any respect for any branch of government?"

'The Frightening Thing'

A few voters feel considerably more than uneasy about Watergate; they have lost more than confidence. They agree with the Republican county official in Westchester who requested anonymity, and then said in a half whisper: "It's frightening, it scares the hell out of you."

"Look how close we were to getting a police state," said Dan Helix, the Democratic mayor of Concord. "An awesome power resides in the Presidency that causes individuals to adopt a whole new value system — the end justifies the means. Nixon justified the use of Government power to make people think and act a certain way, and to operate outside the law. That's the frightening thing to me."

Yet only a small percentage of those interviewed favored impeachment of President Nixon. Many do not think the evidence is conclusive yet and they worry what the shock would do to national morale and the country's standing around the world. Some who heartily dislike Mr. Nixon oppose impeachment because they think Vice President Agnew would be worse.

For all the trauma and upset caused by Watergate, some people see substantial benefits. They point to the hearings as a "demonstration of democracy," an encouraging sign that the system is working; the fault, they feel, lies not with the structure of government, but with the particular men who tried to misuse it.

Abridgement of Rights Seen

Others see it as a national education. Leon D. Finney, director of the Woodlawn organization, called President Nixon "a very dangerous man" and feels the scandal is "therapeutic for the country". As he explained: "What happened is that the Nixon psychosis was gradually abridging the right of dissent. And the public didn't realize that once that right to dissent is abridged, the ability to have the government serve the interests of the people is also abridged."

"I never questioned anything," said Margaret Connors, the wife of the Westchester lawyer and mother of five. "I grew up during World War II and honestly thought that God was on our side. But I won't be so naive again, and neither will my children. I have a 4-year-old who watches the hearings and keeps asking if they're going to put the President in jail."