

SEP 23 1973

WXPPost
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The Truman Model

The speculation about a possible pinch-hitter to succeed Vice President Agnew reveals an extraordinary confusion in thinking about the problems of national leadership, for the emphasis has been on well-known names—on Connally or Rockefeller or some other political star. But the true starting point ought to be the national condition. Analysis of the national condition suggests that what the country needs is not so much a star as an ordinary man who has it in him to tell the truth.

The national condition finds chief expression in a wide range of anomalies. For one thing, there is the swollen, imperial presidency. A flock of planes, a fleet of planes and an array of incredible communications equipment plus total command of the armed forces have imparted to the President and his entourage a power unknown in history. As Walter Mondale, the Minnesota Democrat, put it in a thoughtful speech to the Senate last week: "The presidency has become larger than life and larger than law."

A connected feature of the national condition is the almost automatic disposition of people in authority to tell lies in the name of presidential power. Watergate, of course, is a spectacular case in point. And you would have thought that the unearthing of the scandal would curb the tendency. But not a bit. Months after Watergate had exploded, the Pentagon was still lying about the secret bombing in Cambodia. When it became known a few days ago, that the President had used the Secret Service to tap the telephone of his brother, the White House almost automatically issued a full story, denied by

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the Secret Service, to the effect that the tapping was part of the protection of the President.

A third related anomaly is the vast number of insoluble problems heaped high on the President's desk. Inflation is a supreme example. Prices have risen further and faster than almost anybody imagined possible. The source of the price pressure is not something familiar, such as wage demands or monopolistic policies. It lies in a worldwide shortage of primary products. Nobody knows exactly what to do about the problem. But almost all of us blame the President, and Mr. Nixon frequently sounds as though he is responsible.

What can be said about inflation can be said about a whole range of other issues. Answers to the problems of crime, health, housing, cities, transit, not to mention Cambodia, Laos or Chile, elude confident prescription. Probably the one sure thing is what nobody in an official position ever says—namely, that we don't know the answers.

Responsibility for these anomalies in our national life cannot be fixed on any single President. All of our recent leaders have played a part. Mr. Nixon has contributed not a little to the atmosphere of mistrust and the cynical

purveying of falsehoods. President Johnson, in the name of the Great Society, took into the presidency a whole lot of problems beyond the range of political solution. President Kennedy indulged in a rhetoric that falsified what leadership could truly accomplish. President Eisenhower played the major role in building a presidency larger than life.

But if total blame cannot be confidently assigned to any single administration, at least we know what to avoid in the future. We need to avoid a leader unsure of himself, one who constantly feels he has to prove his mettle by promising the impossible. We should shrink from a wheeler-dealer type politician—the opportunist, however competent, who takes positions independent of whether they are right or wrong. We should be on guard against programmatic liberals, heirs to the Great Society, who believe that government can cure the many ailments which now beset our society. Finally we must be wary of charismatic figures, who despite themselves—by charm or style—excite unrealistic expectations.

What the country needs, in other words, is a modest man prepared to do the best he can, but who is not afraid to acknowledge his own limitations. Among recent presidents, Harry Truman probably comes closest to the model.

The primary requirement is to restore trust and honesty to government. That means a decline in the authority and prestige and glamor of the presidency. It means acceptance by all of us that it is better to take a chance on an ordinary man who can grow in the job than a hero apt to develop feet of clay.

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