

The Fearless Spectator

Charles McCabe

Will It Play in Peoria?

TODAY is a marvelous time to be an American. Not comfortable, not assuring, and certainly not elevating; but marvelous. In this unluckiest of times, if you look at it one way, we are lucky to be alive.

The man at the head of our government is viewed by most of the governed as some kind of crook. Mr. Nixon has not, as we piously remind ourselves, actually been found guilty of anything more than presiding over a web of White House misprisions unmatched, or even unthought of, in our history.

The ancient moral certainties which have powered the public life of the nation since its founding are as subject to command as a herd of bison. The ethical imperatives of the Nixon Administration, to a degree that might make a Machiavelli blanch, were simply the acquisition and keeping of power. Nothing else, and no way. The simple, naked directive which moved the Palace Guard was admirably summed up by one of their rigid, Teutonic leaders, Mr. John Ehrlichman:

"Will it play in Peoria?" Which, if you need a trot, reads: Can we get away with it?

Yet as bad as Mr. Nixon and his coterie of knaves have been, the prospect of no Nixon at all is worse. Even the most rabid of Nixon-haters quails somewhat before the prospect of impeachment proceedings, which will be no more than a continued and protracted and humiliating propf to most of us of the failure of our system.

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IT IS NOT love or affection or even pity for Mr. Nixon that will make us feel this way. The President and his plight have become another example of that most inexorable of political laws. That is the one which states, "They are Us." Mr. Nixon has become You, and Me, and the Lamppost.

The President is yet another affirmation of Terence's dictum that nothing which is common to mankind is foreign to me. What Mr. Nixon has done, you and I could so easily have done if the circumstances were similar, and the price was right.

There is something about Mr. Nixon's plight which makes it impossible for us to be implacable in our judgment. This weakness, in turn, makes us moral cripples, simply unable to take a strong stand against what we know to be wrong, and speak up for what we know to be right.

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THIS INDECISION, which by now amounts to almost a national neurosis, is reflected in the conduct of our public life. As long as the man hangs in there, virtually daring us to have the courage to impose a political death sentence on him, so long will we have him with us as President. Through his own political skills, and the massive movement of political events, his stance is now just about perfect. He is guilty; but no more so, really, than the rest of us. We put him where he is, after all, and in our hearts we knew what we were doing.

Thus we find ourselves living in a kind of anarchy. Whatever power is given the President is given grudgingly, and will so be given for the next three years. To his dark credit and inner consistency, let it be said these grants of power will be accepted with equal grudgefulness by our leader.

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SOME OF US are beginning to realize, for perhaps the first time, the terrible power of the vote. We still believe, and I think rightly so, that we are unique in the freedom with which we govern ourselves. The exercise of the vote in a cause and for a person now widely seen to represent the worst part of our national character is not a result that could have been foreseen by the scribes of our Constitution.

If this be true, we are in a terrible box. We cannot get rid of a seen evil. Our system and our personal ambivalence forbid it. In more ways than one might think, this Watergate business is the severest moral test Americans have had to submit to since the Civil War. We're damned if we do, and damned if we don't. And thrice damned if we continue stuck between doing and don't-ing. Marvelous.