

The desperation of President Nixon's moves this weekend to block the Watergate investigation makes it plain that neither law nor orderly governmental process now stand as obstacles to the exercise of his will.

In firing Special Prosecutor Archibald Cox, the President has broken his original pledge, transmitted to the Senate by Attorney General Richardson as a condition for the latter's own confirmation, that nothing would be allowed to interfere with Mr. Cox's search for the facts. Mr. Richardson's resignation, followed by the peremptory discharge of Deputy Attorney General Ruckelshaus for refusing to become Mr. Cox's executioner, provides eloquent testimony that the President has embarked on a course that honorable men in his Administration could not follow.

The constitutional confrontation, which the courts and the special prosecutor tried so hard to avoid, has been precipitated by a President who considers himself sole judge of the law and who uses the power of his office to purge independence from the executive branch and to supersede the mandate of the courts by arbitrary exercise of his will.

This espousal of absolute rule has thrown the country into a governmental crisis of fearful dimensions. The Justice Department is discredited and paralyzed. The far-flung Watergate prosecutions are in receivership under Acting Attorney General Robert H. Bork, a Nixon loyalist willing to carry out the President's imperious order for Mr. Cox's discharge. Under these circumstances, the pledge by White House Press Secretary Ronald Ziegler that the Justice Department will now pursue the investigations "with thoroughness and vigor" can only be treated as a sick joke.

The position of the Senate Watergate committee has been left in a cloudy never-never land by the on-again, off-again agreement between the White House and the committee's leaders, Senators Ervin and Baker, concerning the tapes. Whatever promises were made originally by the President and his lawyers were quickly rendered meaningless by a seemingly endless series of devious shifts in subsequent White House interpretations.

The weekend debacle has brought to light for the first time some indication of the multitude of ways in which the President has been seeking to obstruct the inquiry into the Watergate scandals. Mr. Cox disclosed that his efforts to get at the facts were frustrated on a much broader front than the disputed tapes of Presidential conversations. Documents of Presidential aides were placed beyond his reach by transfer to the shelter of "Presidential files." This cover of executive privilege was used after Mr. Nixon had personally assured the American people: "Executive privilege will not be invoked as to any testimony concerning possible criminal conduct in the matters under investigation."

These behind-the-scenes deceptions have now been followed by open defiance of Congress, the courts and the ousted special prosecutor. Using the Federal Bureau of Investigation in the manner of a totalitarian police force, the President directed its agents to swoop down on the special prosecutor's offices and to deny Mr. Cox and his staff access to their files or even to their personal papers. One Cox associate, confronted by this gross abuse of police power, commented aptly that "one thinks in a democracy this would not happen."