

The End Begins

By Anthony Lewis

WASHINGTON, Oct. 21—During his few minutes as Acting Attorney General, William Ruckelshaus had a telephone call from the White House chief of staff, Gen. Alexander Haig. The General conveyed President Nixon's order to fire Archibald Cox as special Watergate prosecutor. Mr. Ruckelshaus, like Elliot Richardson, refused. Then General Haig said:

"Your Commander-in-Chief has given you an order."

There it was, naked: the belief that the President reigns and rules, that loyalty runs to his person rather than to law and institutions. It is precisely the concept of power against which Americans rebelled in 1776, and that they designed the Constitution to bar forever in this country. It is in fact a form of power that no English monarch has exercised since George the Third.

General Haig's military phrase was significant in another sense also. Over this extraordinary weekend, Washington had the smell of an attempted coup d'état. Like the plotters in a novel, Mr. Nixon and his men invoked threats abroad. They skillfully enlisted political elders enfeebled by years of subservience. They tried to cut out the judges, the lawyers, the constitutionalists. They sent the police to seal the dangerous files. Mr. Cox's assistant, Henry Ruth, caught the feeling when he said: "Maybe it isn't 'Seven Days in May,' but it is one-day in October."

But short of a real military coup, the attempt has failed. Most important, the issue facing this country has been made so clear that no one with eyes to see can avoid it any longer. That issue is the legitimacy of this President.

The American system gives enormous presumptive weight to the legitimacy of any President, and rightly so. Fixed Presidential terms and orderly succession have been anchors of stability in our turbulent history. But the Framers of the Constitution did not stake all on the Executive; they did not make him absolute or immovable. In the end, they rested their faith on law.

By his acts of the last few days, Richard Nixon has made manifest his contempt for law and for the very tripartite structure of our Government that he so often invokes. He has sought to teach Americans the lesson

that the great among us may choose whether and how to obey the law. He has broken a solemn promise made to the United States Senate—the promise to let the truth of Watergate be discovered and the law enforced.

It is impossible now to resist the inference that Mr. Nixon has been trying to conceal evidence of his own violations of the criminal law. That would explain his dogged refusal to disgorge not only the White House tapes but much other documentary material—and explain his fear of Archibald Cox.

Much that has happened in this last week was really designed to get rid of Mr. Cox. So obsessive had that aim become in Mr. Nixon's mind that it was like the cry of Henry the Second about Thomas à Becket: "Who will free me from this turbulent priest?" Eventually someone was found to wield the dagger. His name was Robert Bork, but it will count no more in history than the forgotten names of Becket's murderers.

Oct. 20 was a frightening day in Washington. But it was also profoundly encouraging to those who have maintained their faith in the American system during the horrors of the Nixon years. For there were men who, despite the most terrible pressures, followed the path of honor and the law.

No one who watched Archibald Cox could be altogether cynical again about the good that lies in the American character. It was "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington," for real: the almost naive decency, the sense of duty, the care for personal kindness even in that extreme situation. And then came the redeeming support of Elliot Richardson and William Ruckelshaus.

Mr. Nixon will try to meet the crisis now with one more effort to rally the country behind his person. The answer to that is that royalism has no place in America — and besides, the king is dead. We must look elsewhere for continuity, for legitimacy.

The struggle of the next few days and weeks will require many of us to give up comfortable assumptions. Government officials will have to think again about where their loyalties lie. The lawyers of this country will have to speak out. Constitutional conservatives, above all Barry Goldwater, will have to recognize that Richard Nixon has betrayed them especially.

Today even Congress, which so often rolls on its back like a spaniel, is beginning to face the necessity of impeachment. It need not come to that; for the good of the country it should not. Rather, before long, someone in Richard Nixon's shrinking palace guard will surely tell him that he must listen as the country sends him the same cry that went across the floor of the House of Commons to Neville Chamberlain in 1940: "In the name of God, go."