

'Crises of Authority'

"One cannot have crises of authority in a society for a period of months without paying a price somewhere along the line."

Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger
Oct. 25, 1973

The price this Republic has already paid for the crimes and abuses of authority that are so inadequately described by the term Watergate is sobering enough. Too many constructive energies have been monopolized. The ability of the Government to cope with the problems of the future has been dulled by its inability to cope with the problems it created in the past.

Less than one year after its re-election by triumphant landslide, an entire Administration lies in shambles. Its personnel, up to and including its second highest member, is decimated, its promises discredited, its convictions and capabilities overturned. A handful of men, once awesome in their collective and individual power, are paying the price of their paradise lost, their honor—or pretensions—shattered. A far greater number of Americans has paid the price of disillusionment—with their once-trusted leaders, with their system of politics.

Within the past week, the price of crisis was raised to include the threatened loss of confidence in the ability of the Government to act objectively in a decisive moment of foreign policy. It was a somber time indeed when the United States Secretary of State was obliged to stand before the American public, and the world, to give reassurance that the "senior officials of the American Government are not playing with the lives of the American people."

The world-wide military alert ordered early Thursday morning by President Nixon may indeed have been the correct and prudent response to an external threat to vital American interests. If it was an over-reaction to the information that the Soviet Union was planning to send a substantial military force to the Middle East, at least a "military alert" was relatively safe as compared with, say, the dispatch of the fleet to Alexandria or El Arish. But, if all that was intended was a signal to the Russians, the legitimate question arises: what is the "hot line" for, what are the diplomats for?

In any event, two points can be made. First, if any foreign governments believe that the United States has been immobilized from effective international action by internal tensions, they seriously underestimate the powers and capacities of the American Presidency. Any incumbent in that position is accountable to the American people for his decisions, but such accounting is not demanded in advance on urgent decisions that involve war or peace.

Second, if even at a moment of potential nuclear

crisis, questions have to be put about the motives of the man or men making these decisions, the crisis of authority in this country is extracting too great a price to be paid. The resolution of America's leadership crisis is the most serious and urgent business now before the courts, the Congress and the people of the United States.

The Ford Nomination

Congressional consideration of Representative Gerald Ford's nomination to the Vice Presidency should be moved along as swiftly as a genuine probing of his qualifications will allow. The case for speed rests on a twofold need:

- The country must be reassured as soon as possible that, in case the office of President is vacated, the succession will be normal, smooth and entirely predictable;

- Those who voted in the last national election are entitled to know that, in accordance with their balloting, a Republican will preside over the country until the electorate decides otherwise. This would not be the case if, in the absence of a Vice President, the Speaker of a Democratic House of Representatives were automatically made Chief Executive under the Twenty-fifth Amendment.

Compelling as is the need for orderly succession, it cannot be made an excuse for slurring over any real question of Mr. Ford's fitness for the office. Alleged links between campaign contributions and the disbursement of Government favors warrant close scrutiny and fullest explanation. The country cannot afford future belated discoveries à la Agnew.

Congress has an equally important obligation to pass judgment on the competence of a potential President who has never held an executive post nor, in 25 years on Capitol Hill, given his name to a single important piece of legislation. This is not to suggest that the test should be one of political orientation. With a voting record that indicates a conservatism greater than that of President Nixon, Mr. Ford would hardly be the independent choice of a Democratic Congress; but the Constitution makes it plain that the choice is Mr. Nixon's to make. It should be confirmed or rejected with every concern for his designate's honesty and competence for the supremely challenging job he may be called upon to fill, but not on the basis of his social philosophy.

Above all, the procedure on Capitol Hill should be simple and clean-cut. This is no occasion for unnecessary delay in acting on the President's choice, or for forcing Mr. Nixon into a package deal with Congress.

The time has come for directness, nonpartisan judgment and action taken in the spirit as well as the letter of the law. That is the only way in which Congress can properly pass on the Ford nomination.