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Custodian of Power

He lost his first attempt, back in 1960, but two years later, in his campaign for incumbent California Gov. Pat Brown's job, he let slip his true ambition.

"If elected governor of the United . . ." he said in a campaign speech. He caught himself, but there it was. All the man ever wanted was to be President. That and, of course, the power that goes with the job.

Ah, the frustrations that come from getting what you want.

He lost the California election—perhaps the low point in his entire career. But he hung in, and finally, in 1968, he got what he'd always wanted.

And there he was, President of the United States and, by definition, the most powerful man in the world. Not only that, but four years later he was re-elected to that honor, this time by a record margin: overwhelmingly chosen

for a second term as the most powerful person in the world. I mean, hot damn!

Then this most powerful man in the world started to exercise his power. He told John Dean to shut up, and Dean spilled his guts. He told his administration to keep a lid on the scandals that came to surround him, and the leaks became a flood tide. He sent messages to the newspaper and TV people to get off his back, and the reporters kept riding.

That's how it went for nearly a year when, finally, he'd had enough. He summoned forth all the majesty and force of his most powerful office and told Archie Cox to back off. Cox said No.

He ordered Cox's boss, Elliot Richardson, to fire Cox. Richardson said No. Well, somebody has to fire this wise-acre who's making trouble for the most powerful man in the world. Ruckelshaus? No, sir.

This is the job, the power he always wanted? What went wrong? Who changed the rules? The frustration is enough to drive a guy a little dippy, if not turn him into a screaming madman.

Nor does it stop there. The public humiliation of this pitiful Titan is evidenced not just in recalcitrant underlings, but in a televised shouting match he comes off as the mere equal of his former employee, newsman Clark Mollenhoff.

That's power? How can you be the most powerful man in the world and not be able to make anybody do anything?

The man seems not to have understood that the awesome power he thought he possessed was never his; it was ours all along. He had it on loan, on condition that he not abuse it.

The power is there, all right: the power to serve the people, and to inspire and lead them. But not to control them, or lord it over them, or abuse them and their institutions.

He has the power to destroy us all. But he can't make anybody do anything at all. He can't even make us let him do anything at all. It may be that the most important power of that most powerful job is the power to let the people do what they believe is best.

For after all, Americans elect people to be their agents, not their betters. And if that frustrates and disappoints him in his chosen career, there must be some relief in knowing that there are other careers.

The alternative, I'm afraid, is for him to continue his efforts to transform the kind of power we loaned him into the kind of power he apparently wants. The attempt at making just that sort of transformation is what has us in such trouble now.

That transformation attempt is by no means limited to honest differences of opinion over such doctrines as separation of powers and executive privilege, or to a bit of questionable hanky-panky here and there.

Ask yourself: What would be the state of the nation now if Frank Wills, that \$80-a-week Watergate nightwatchman, had been a little less attentive and a little less smart that summer night in 1972? (Incidentally, don't we owe Wills a little something for saving us?)

Somehow, we've let ourselves believe that if those guys had gotten away on June 17, they would have turned in their burglars' tools and resigned on June 18.

Well, doesn't it make more sense to suppose that these burglars were agents—even if only indirectly and without specific knowledge—of the most powerful man in the world? Doesn't it seem reasonable to suppose that they would have kept right on working for him until (1) they got caught or (2) it didn't matter whether they got caught or not?

For that is the direction the power transformation was headed—is headed: Accumulate enough power by doing things that are against the law and finally you are the law.

Well, he's not the law yet. And if that disappoints him, that's his problem. For our part, we'd demand the return of the power we loaned him before he does it any further damage.