

By Russell Baker

OBSERVER

WASHINGTON, Nov. 5—What a weekend! Phone ringing constantly. Children dashing into the dining room just at dinnertime to cry, "Daddy, Moscow's calling!" or, "Daddy, Key Biscayne's calling!"

Calls like those must be answered, of course. It would never do to send the children back to the phone with instructions to tell Moscow that Daddy was just sitting down to dinner and could not be disturbed. And as for Key Biscayne, well—!

C.B.S. was rather insistent. We had all anticipated they would be after we had seen Joseph Alsop on Dan Rather's Evening News program Saturday evening. It gave us a start to hear that Alsop had indeed called for the President's resignation.

Although we had read his column in the paper Friday, seeing Alsop himself repeat it on C.B.S. seemed to make it irrevocable. Then the other news of giants pronouncing came like thunderclaps in the night. The Denver Post, The Detroit News, The New York Times had all declared editorially. All were for resignation.

"Tell C.B.S. Daddy is busy reading Proust and cannot be disturbed," I instructed the children.

Moments later they were back. "C.B.S. says it's vital," they reported. "Paris, London and Zurich say they must know immediately whether you will be for or against resignation."

"When I have something to announce, I will announce it," I finally told C.B.S. It was a cold response to good colleagues in the news business, but sentiment must not be allowed to distort good judgment at times like these.

A rash decision by a newspaper columnist on an issue this grave might wipe out Wall Street. I could not afford to panic under pressure and announce a decision—either for or against resignation—that the world might soon regret. Fortunately, I have what it takes. And so, the tougher things got, the cooler I got.

"Moscow," I said, very coolly indeed, "I am far too busy reading a chap named Proust to give any attention to this resignation business just now. You will know in good time where I stand, and in the meantime I suggest you just keep cool and not worry too much yet about Alsop, The

Denver Post, The Detroit News and The New York Times."

Actually, as cool as I was, I was in a panic. "Daddy's chicken," said one of the children. "He can't make the big decisions." They were put to bed instantly and sentenced to loss of three days of television privileges.

The Sunday paper and radio suffused the autumn sunlight with portents of doom.

Jack Anderson had been heard from. William F. Buckley Jr. had spoken in the Middle West, forecasting resignation in terms so moving that it was hard to see how the President could resist.

Moreover, James Reston's patience was nearing its end. Anthony Lewis was announced for resignation, and there was a rumor that Evans and Novak were nearing a decision. Even Time magazine.

When Key Biscayne called, the voice was understandably gloomy. When Time came out for resignation, Key Biscayne said, it would cancel the whole impact of William Safire, who had just come out against resignation. What was needed at this critical moment, Key Biscayne went on, was a columnist with the courage to stand up and—

"Proust," I told Key Biscayne. "I am too busy reading Proust just now to decide the fate of the Republic."

That was a truly cowardly reply, of course. There may have been important things to be gained from offering them a decision then and there to come out against resignation. But does one really dare say, "All right, I'll save your skin, but only on the promise you won't go after me with the tax boys"?

That seems so crass. Perhaps even criminal. How in the world do politicians muster the gall to make the deals they do? And being known afterwards as the person who wrote the decisive column against resignation would not be so easy to live with either. Would Joseph Alsop ever speak to such a man again?

This is not an easy position. One wrong phrase, and it could be curtains for civilization as we have known it, but fortunately, I am cool. If C.B.S. phones tell them I am too busy with treacherous Albertine to settle the Presidential hash right now.