

By William Safire

WASHINGTON, Nov. 7—Because the President's popularity has nosedived in the public opinion polls, we are told, he has lost the ability to govern: On that eminently practical ground, some of our pragmatic editorialists insist, the wise and patriotic course would be for Richard Nixon to resign.

That would be the "easy way," and nothing would be more unwise or unpatriotic because it would radically alter the nature of our system of government.

In a parliamentary system, when a government becomes unpopular and loses a vote of confidence, it "falls" and a new election is held. That system is fine for Great Britain; what it loses in stability it gains in responsiveness; but it is not the system the United States has had for two centuries.

The American system provides several restraints on the wide swings of public opinion. For example, only one-third of the Senate comes up for election every two years, so that a popular surge at any one time cannot suddenly transform the ideological bent of the whole of that deliberative body.

More to the point, our "Founding Fathers"—that phrase was coined by Warren G. Harding, of all people—rejected the parliamentary system in favor of the election of a separately powerful President for a specific term, so that a President could, if he felt he must, make unpopular decisions without being thrown out of office immediately.

Those who now demand that this President resign because he has "lost the ability to govern" are calling for the most fundamental change—not just

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in a leader, but in the traditions that make up our governmental system.

They cannot escape the consequences of their demand, which would be a kind of 27th Amendment, written or unwritten, that would say: *"The President shall hold office for a term of four years, or until such time as his rating in the two leading national public opinion polls falls below 30 per cent for three consecutive months, at which time it can be assumed the President has lost the ability to govern and he must then resign."*

Nobody has actually proposed such an amendment, of course—why, that would be downright radical—yet that would be the inescapable result of any successful hounding-into-resignation of a President.

The enormous power of precedent that has helped keep Presidents from resigning under pressure through two centuries, thus stabilizing our system, would be flip-flopped by a Nixon resignation: The pressure of precedent in the future would be to force Presidents who lose popular favor to submit their necks to the pollsters' ax.

The consequences cannot be dismissed with a flip "Watergate is unique." Hard cases make bad law, and the precedents we set today will shape the system our grandchildren will be living with. The shrill keening for resignation will soon become muted for reasons as disparate as the situation is desperate:

First, a coup d'état by forced resignation, by its nature, must be quick, but Mr. Nixon will not cooperate.

Second, Nixon-haters are already defecting from the quit-now ranks because they do not want to see him get off so easily—they want to nail their coonskin to the wall. And third, conservatives, no matter how angry or upset this week, will come to see the destabilizing effects of such a course, which is profoundly in opposition to conservative doctrine.

When Americans come to consider the real choice that the resigners have posed, they will see that the alternative is not Nixon and controversy versus somebody else and unity—but the continuity of the present system versus its replacement by the parliamentary system. The same people who claim our present situation to be unique, worthy of ditching 200 years of tradition, would—in all sincerity—find something uniquely disposable about next year's President. And the President in the year after that.

The legal overthrow of an elected leader is dirty work: people who demand that the President resign to avert impeachment are asking Mr. Nixon to do their dirty work for them. Is the prospect of the most extreme kind of struggle, followed by years of bitterness at what many will consider vindictive political usurpation, preferable to two years of a very careful Nixon Administration before the campaign of 1976 gets under way?

If Mr. Nixon's critics turn their accusation that he cannot govern into a self-fulfilling prophecy; if they make the cry of "Resign!" a part of the American political discourse, then we are likely to wind up with the kind of Constitution Lord Macaulay accused Americans of having: "All sail and no anchor."