

Books of The Times

# Historical and Polemical

By CHRISTOPHER LEHMANN-HAUPT

**THE IMPERIAL PRESIDENCY.** By Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. 505 pages. Houghton Mifflin. \$10.

It would be silly to underestimate the value of "The Imperial Presidency," the historian Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr.'s latest sounding of America's political leadership. If nothing else, it is a handy bedside guide in which to check out all the little history lessons we've been getting lately from the White House ("few Presidents seem to have had such limited acquaintance with the history of the republic," Professor Schlesinger writes at one point of the present incumbent). But far more important, it places the entire Nixon Administration to date in the broad perspective of American history, and by carefully analyzing key issues in the evolution of that history, offers a bold and disquieting



Frank English  
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thesis on how we arrived at our present crisis. And a crisis it truly is, if we are to take Professor Schlesinger at his word—a crisis as profound and threatening to our system as even the most pessimistic observers have been saying.

## Richard Nixon, Revolutionary

For if we go back to the deliberations of the framers of the Constitution, as Professor Schlesinger makes us do, and then trace the evolution of the separation of powers that the Founding Fathers saw as essential to the democratic system, then we must reach the conclusion that the system is now dangerously off balance—that the office of the Presidency has by stages ascended and run rampant, and that it now threatens to become revolutionary in conception. Yes, Mr. Schlesinger believes that "Richard M. Nixon, for all his conventionality of utterance and mind, was a genuine revolutionary. Who can say why? . . . Whatever the explanation, the theory of the Presidency he embodied and propagated meant that the President of the United States, on his own personal and secret finding of emergency, had the right to nullify the Constitution and the law. No President had ever made such a claim before."

And it is not simply Watergate that compels Professor Schlesinger to this alarming conclusion. It is everything from Mr. Nixon's style (he has introduced the first "solipsistic Presidency") to his substance, everything "from his appropriation of the war-making power to his interpretation of the appointing power, from his unilateral determination of social priorities to his unilateral abolition of statutory programs, from his attack on legislative

privilege to his enlargement of executive privilege, from his theory of impoundment to his theory of the pocket veto, from his calculated disparagement of the Cabinet and his calculated discrediting of the press to his carefully organized concentration of Federal management in the White House." Watergate, says Professor Schlesinger, was only a symptom, only a burst pimple on the surface of a deep abscess.

No, one isn't about to undervalue such a study—the somber picture it draws, the ineluctable process of history it re-creates. Yet one isn't inclined to overvalue it either, for there is something that breaks the book apart and makes the last third of it seem tedious by comparison with what goes before.

## Two Books in One

The trouble, I think, is that "The Imperial Presidency" is really two books that overlap each other but don't really blend. On the one hand, we have a history of executive-legislative relations—a story that flows compellingly to its climax, swept along by Professor Schlesinger's cogent thesis that it was the executive branch's ascendancy in foreign affairs that led to its recent and precipitate domination of the domestic sector. On the other hand, we have Professor Schlesinger's set of prescriptions for the present crisis (as an admirer of Franklin D. Roosevelt and John F. Kennedy, he once believed in a strong executive; but now he cries "mea culpa" and opts for cooperation and "comity" between the President and the Congress).

Yet curiously, the history and the prescription don't dovetail. The historical section reads all too much like polemic, tending, as it does throughout, toward Mr. Schlesinger's barely concealed outrage with President Nixon. The prescriptive section, which might well have been polemical, reads disappointingly like past history, confining itself as it does to a rather bland examination of what the Congress has done so far to fight back. And it is only on the last page or two, where he implies that impeachment now remains our only feasible course, that Mr. Schlesinger begins to raise his fist again.

Actually, what I suspect may have happened is that Professor Schlesinger set out to study the long-run growth of the Presidency's diplomatic and war-making powers, then was overtaken by developments under the Nixon Administration, then steered his book into choppy polemical waters and finally tried to bail out with a dispassionate consideration of prescriptions. In any case, what he has ended up with is hybrid—not completely history and not quite a polemic. It is valuable and provocative beyond question and required reading for anyone who still nurses hope for the system. But for the sake of the book's tidiness and readability, one wishes Professor Schlesinger had either gone all out for polemic, or waited until the present crisis had receded into the past and treated it all as history.