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Living With Illusion

By Anthony Lewis

Over Thanksgiving we permitted ourselves a certain amount of self-congratulation at the way the United States has responded to the disclosure of lawlessness in its leadership. It is still a good country, we said; it did not let evil go unnoticed; the system worked.

There is something real in that feeling. Few republics could have had the political shocks we have had in the last year and emerged with their institutions—and their self-respect—so largely intact.

Up to a point, then, there is reason for thanksgiving. But only up to a point. For having framed the issue of lawlessness in the Presidency, the nation is in danger of shying away from its necessary resolution.

There are signs of a temptation to live with deceit and evasion instead of facing them down. How much do we care that President Nixon promises the facts and continues to hide them, that the explanations for nonproduction of tapes and other evidence have moved from the incredible to the absurd? Have we become like that tarnished silver knight Senator Howard Baker, who passed off the latest missing tape segment with a laugh, indicating that such things have lost their capacity to shock?

The real question is the attitude of Congress. Will it show determination in pressing the process of impeachment, or will it go back to its usual ways of indecision and nest-feathering?

The argument is indeed heard now that the country would be better off

ABROAD AT HOME

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finessing the Nixon problem and living the next three years with a President it does not believe. Eugene McCarthy, who loves saying things that provoke his liberal friends, said the other day that we ought to forget about impeachment and concentrate instead on rebuilding the power of Congress.

To settle back down with Richard Nixon might be good advice on one condition: If he himself has learned from all that has happened, if he understood what it meant, if he felt any genuine remorse. But he has given no indication that he understands.

The man Mr. Nixon twice selected to be Vice President of the United States was exposed as a petty grafter and resigned his office. Has Mr. Nixon expressed a word of public regret or explanation? No.

The United States Air Force bombed a neutral country on orders from the President, and then concocted an elaborate scheme of false reports to cover up the bombing. When it was belatedly disclosed, Mr. Nixon said he would do it again if necessary.

The President formally promulgated a secret plan for Federal agents to use burglary, wiretapping and other illegal methods. When J. Edgar Hoover objected, the “plumbers” were established in the White House instead. Far from indicating regret about either the plan or the plumbers, Mr. Nixon has struggled to conceal the facts about them.

The Committee to Re-Elect the President, according to extensive public testimony, engaged in a campaign to extort illegal contributions from corporations. Mr. Nixon’s public reaction has been to suggest without evidence that the Democrats did it, too.

That is a handful of examples among many making it overwhelmingly plain that Mr. Nixon feels no real regret at the official lawlessness of the last five years. When he talks of taking responsibility, there is no conviction in his voice. In fact it often sounds as though he ought to be receiving apologies instead of giving them.

Mr. Nixon’s attitude was captured in irony by George F. Will, Washington editor of the National Review, writing in The Washington Post. The President, he said, indicated that he had been too busy with peace to worry about politics—but courageously “took responsibility for delegating political matters to idealists who were overzealous in a cause they deeply believed was right.”

Mr. Will is a constitutional conservative and also a pessimist. He believes that Mr. Nixon will succeed in his effort to “treat his legal problems as public relations problems.” In the end Congress will not care about the rule of law, he says: it will not challenge the “meretricious rubbish” offered by Mr. Nixon in his defense; it will not bring to impeachment as much decisiveness as it did to the problem of television football blackouts.

Can that be right? I am more of an optimist, and I do not think so. But the danger is there, and it makes clear the price we would pay for not fighting Presidential lawlessness to the end. Congress would be known to have failed its ultimate constitutional duty. And future Presidents would be encouraged to think that in the long run, deceit and evasion do as well with Americans as truth and law.