

James Reston Reports:

Richard Nixon's Best Hope

Washington

AT SOME POINT the American people are probably going to have to think about the consequences of indecision: about not being able to resolve the Nixon question, not being able either to believe in him or get rid of him.

In easy days when food and gas are cheap and plentiful and most folks feel that somehow everything is going to get better, or at least tolerable, it may be all right to loiter along, but when the people are perplexed and sense that something is deeply wrong in their personal lives and in the life of the country, action is often preferable to inaction.

For over ten years now, the American people have been sunk in a war they thought they could neither win nor end, they have been battered by racial troubles, by street demonstrations, by inflation, rising prices, a devalued dollar, trade deficits, balance of trade problems, the danger and stupor of dope, and a lot of other things — including what to do about the kids — that troubled them but seemed beyond their control.

Watergate and all its attendant scandals were merely the latest chapter in this disillusioning American story, and for a while the people couldn't believe it and then couldn't ignore it, and were angry about it, but now they are receding again into a kind of protective feeble cynicism.

"The fundamental question which faces us everywhere and in many forms," Walter Lippmann wrote long ago, "has to do with the nature of man, and most precisely, it is whether adult men and

women are to be regarded as having that freedom of will which makes them personally responsible for their conduct."

Lippmann went beyond the question of personal responsibility, and argued that the people were ultimately accountable for the conduct of their government, not only at the next election, and that their failure to defend the rights and principles they inherited would weaken both them and the nation.

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THIS IS NOT to say that the American people are responsible for the White House plumbings or all the crimes, conspiracies, burglaries, extortions, forgeries, deceptions, or payoffs of the Watergate scandals. Nor should they take it on themselves to try to replace their representatives in the impeachment process, but it does suggest that they have a responsibility to petition the government for a redress of their grievances and for the establishment of leaders and procedures they can trust.

There is now obviously some confusion in America about all this. The debate in the country is centering on whether we are being fair to Mr. Nixon instead of whether we are being fair to America, which is not the same thing. Haldeman and Ehrlichman had to go, not because they had lost the confidence of the President, but because they had lost the confidence of almost everybody else.

Spiro Agnew had to go because he fiddled with his income tax and got some free liquor and groceries, but Mr. Nixon fiddled with our freedom, ran a war in Cambodia without the consent of the Congress, and deceived the American people about it, established a secret police in the White House, and picked the clumsiest bunch of amateurs that ever tried to impose their bad judgments on the government of the United States.

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YOU CAN EXCUSE this all you like, and admire the President's guts for fighting for his life, which is fair enough, but some things you cannot do. You cannot restore enough confidence and trust in enough people to enable the President to preside over ambiguous policies which in the end have to be taken on faith in the integrity and good judgment of the President.

And you cannot avoid the consequences of three more years of indecision. Not to decide this question is one way of deciding it, and assuring that the doubts and frustrations and cynicism of the people — particularly the rising generation — go on.

The Judiciary Committee of the House will not impeach and the Senate will not sit in judgment on the case unless they are forced to by public opinion. But the evidence "at this point in time," as the Watergate boys say, is that the people are tired and bored with the whole thing, and this is the President's hope, and the nation's problem.

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