

# The Leadership Crisis

The nation's leadership crisis continues unresolved. The inquiry in Judge Sirica's courtroom into the perplexing nonexistence of two of the Watergate tapes and the eighteen-minute "gap" in a third has offset President Nixon's "Operation Candor." At best, the President's recent speeches and disclosures have bought him a little more time.

With the confirmation of Representative Gerald Ford as Vice President, however, the way begins to open up for a resolution of this crisis. Mr. Ford's accession to the Vice-Presidency removes the legitimate concern of many Republicans that any move against Mr. Nixon would elevate House Speaker Carl Albert, a Democrat, to the Presidency and unfairly deprive their party of power. Now it is possible to consider the leadership problem squarely on its merits.

In intellect and experience in foreign affairs, Mr. Nixon is clearly superior to Mr. Ford, his putative successor. Important as those considerations are, Mr. Nixon's capacity to govern has been swamped by the unending and diverse scandals for which the word "Watergate" has become only a shorthand description. The moral quality of his leadership is so much in dispute that the country has to settle that question regardless of his specific accomplishments, past or possible.

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The proper constitutional forum for settling the question is an impeachment trial. Only such a trial could cleanly resolve the issues. There is much merit in the argument that impeachment would be worth the time it takes because it would validate the Constitution's procedure for restraining a lawless President and would leave Mr. Nixon's partisans satisfied that he had received due process.

The nation has, however, already suffered for some months from having an executive branch immobilized by the lack of Presidential direction. The dangerous situation in the Middle East, the energy crisis and inflation require a reinvigorated Presidency. Additional months of strain and stalemate during an impeachment trial might prove costly. On balance, therefore, this newspaper reiterates its view that Mr. Nixon could best serve the nation by resigning. But if he continues to refuse to do so, impeachment is the only recourse.

Except in the vital realm of ethics, Mr. Ford might well represent no improvement. His record on racial equality, civil liberties, economic justice and social reform certainly provides no ground for optimism. His knowledge of foreign affairs is thin; he is untested as an executive, and his speeches are routinely partisan and banal.

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But Mr. Ford would have the immense advantage of offering the country a fresh start and would benefit from a surge of public goodwill and cooperation. If he emulated Harry Truman in recognizing his own limitations, choosing the best advisers he could find, delegating considerable authority to them, and listening to diverse counsel, he could conceivably turn in a creditable performance.

The country scarcely has an alternative other than to act upon this optimistic belief. President Nixon's credibility has dropped below the point of no return. It would take a miracle for him now to retrieve public confidence. The primary responsibility of the leaders of his own party in and out of Congress is to persuade him to recognize the true dimensions of his situation and to act upon that recognition.

Now that the Democratic-controlled Congress has confirmed Mr. Ford, who has impeccable credentials as a Republican party loyalist and who is widely acceptable within his own party, the duty of the G.O.P. to resolve the nation's crisis of leadership becomes inescapable.