

The rebirth of a nation

CITIZENS of the United States may recall 1973 as the Winter of Their Discontent.

Almost inconceivable events forced them to question the validity of principles of their government — and the integrity and morality of men responsible for implementation of those principles of government.

Intuitively, they clung firmly to Winston Churchill's definition of democracy — the worst of all possible forms of government, save all others. Rationally, they weren't sure.

Such pessimism is unwarranted, in the opinion of David Halberstam, who just might be the "best and the brightest" of contemporary, interpretive historians.

Discussing the meaning of Watergate, the fall of the dollar, the energy crisis, the health of democracy during a wide-ranging interview here recently, he said:

I think it is really fairly healthy.

"Watergate is a healthy thing. It shows the processes can work. Now we see an almost epic struggle to restore democracy to Congress, to make the enormously exaggerated and powerful executive branch accountable."

The almost "imperial presidency," he continued, was a result of the Cold War. Then it was believed the United States, to stand up to the totalitarian Soviet Union, had to possess the ability to move swiftly.

"The presidency and the President," Halberstam continued, "began to usurp powers from all other institutions." Constitutional violations such as President Truman's commitment of troops to the Korean conflict without congressional approval were accepted on the need for speed.

Q — What do you think has been the reaction of people to Watergate?

A — I think there is a kind of cumulative sense that people believe something quite terrible has gone on and that the President is not being truthful, that government has been doing things it shouldn't with a cumulative loss of mandate and pulling back from trusting the President.

I think a lot of people who voted for Richard Nixon, who like to trust their President, no longer trust him. I think he is in a very fragile position. I don't think he can get credibility back.

Q — Would you say democracy is in the intensive care unit and has a chance for recovery?

A — I think this country has a great capacity to be reborn. I think we are finding that in its own slow and flawed way, democracy somehow does work.

One reason we are protected against

David Halberstam is a widely read historian of contemporary times. As a reporter he has covered government in Washington and wars in Africa and Indo China. His book "The Best and Brightest" was on The New York Times best seller list for nine months. The accompanying article is based on an interview with Examiner staff writer William Flynn.



—Examiner photo by Walt Lynott

demaiguery is the very slowness of our democracy.

Q - What motivated the men of the Nixon administration when they brought about what is known as Watergate?

A - I think it was a kind of arrogance. I think they thought they had such control of the political process they could sort of tough it out.

Q - Tough it out to achieve what? Totalitarian government by executive order?

A - I think that is too strong a definition. I regard Watergate as essentially an attempt, almost a coup d'etat, against the state. You had Alderman almost trying to take over the government.

Q - Do you think President Nixon will be impeached?

A - I don't think he will be impeached but I also don't think he will make it through his term.

Q - Why?

A - There will be a moment when Barry Goldwater and a few others go to him and say:

"You can either give the most magnanimous speech of your life or we are going to hang you."

He will think about it. One day you'll find him resigning. He likes to say how he is going to tough it out. Really tough people don't tell you how tough they are. People who do always turn out to be bullies.

He is betting Congress is too weak to get

him. I don't think he is going to get away with it.

Q - If he leaves, will the detente with the Peoples Republic of China and the Soviet Union be affected?

A - I don't think it has very much to do with him. We didn't get those relationships because they thought Richard Nixon was a terrific fellow.

We got them because of a mutuality of our interests and their interests — and there always will continue to be Henry Kissinger.

Q - There will be a new president in 1976. Who?

A - First, you have to go to the '74 off-year election. It will be an absolute, unmitigated disaster for the Republicans — not just Watergate but economic chaos.

The Democrats likely will be very arrogant in '76. But the Republicans then will be a very interesting party. They may turn out one attractive candidate.

Q - Rockefeller? Reagan?

A - I have a feeling people are not going to want faces who have been around a long time.

Q - What is your reaction to a rather rough year?

A - Democracy is working. It is a series of imperfections. But Watergate teaches us the dangers of an evil — too much power to one — in a democracy. Politicians must remember there is no Divine Right to the presidency. It is the office of a working politician and thus does have flaws.

In all, it is a very exciting time, a time of classical struggle.