

The Last 1000 Days of Richard Nixon

Washington

AMONG MANY who long at the beginning of the new year for a new government and a new spirit in America, there is still a reluctance to call for the resignation or impeachment of the President, something that holds them back, probably some fear that somehow this would weaken the presidency and harm the nation.

There is something to this notion, but not much. The President is not the government. The security and continuity of the Republic do not rest on any one man, not even on a Lincoln let alone a Nixon. The system is strong and resilient, and could not only survive Mr. Nixon's departure but might even endure his presence for three more years.

But if he were to go quietly, the Administration would remain in place with the Congress and the courts, the market would probably jump up after a startled hiccup, and a grateful nation would rally around the new president as it did after the deaths of Roosevelt and Kennedy.

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THE POPULAR arguments for tolerating three more years of Nixon are that his achievements in the field of foreign affairs, particularly with the Soviets and the Chinese, might be lost if he resigned, and that Vice President Ford is not as experienced in the foreign arena as Mr. Nixon, which is obviously true.

But if the American people sometimes confuse the power of America with the personality or character of the president, foreign governments do not. The danger now is not that powerful foreign governments might try to take advantage of a new president, but that they might try to take advantage of a distrusted president



James Reston

presiding over a divided America.

Also, in the next three years, the critical foreign questions are not likely to depend on Mr. Nixon's personal relations with Brezhnev or Chou En-lai, but on United States relations with Western Europe, Japan, and the Middle East, where Mr. Nixon's achievements in the last five years have not been spectacular.

These are the coming areas. In strategic terms, the Middle East is the key. It is the fundamental political question in the world, for the oil-blockade, protected by Soviet power, threatens the industrial security of Europe, Japan, and in a more limited sense, of the United States.

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ANOTHER POPULAR argument against the resignation of the President is that it might set a bad precedent and hurt the institution of the presidency. But why?

Nothing is likely to hurt the presidency more than tolerating a man who has been unfaithful to the spirit of the constitution, who has put a gang of twisters and moral cripples in high office, and lost the trust of the people.

This trust is the first article in the political contract and essential to the moral authority of the presidency. The question is not what Mr. Nixon's mandate was in the last election, but what it is now.

Once a president has lost the confidence of the electorate, resignation is not a bad but a good precedent, and if it were established by any party that a president could be called on by its leaders to resign, future presidents might be more careful about fiddling with the freedom of the people.

After all, resignation or dismissal is what happens in all other American institutions or parliamentary democracies when the chief executive fails. They don't ask whether he meant to fail, or hire burglars, or turn over his authority to dunderheads or crooks, but merely whether he presided over the disaster, and if so, they get themselves a new chief executive officer, coach, or prime minister.

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MAYBE THE SILLIEST argument against the resignation of Mr. Nixon is that it would hurt the Republican party. Quite the opposite is the case. Nothing could hurt it more than to keep him in place for three long years at the center of an endless controversy over Watergate and all its related horrors.

In human terms, it is easy to understand the reluctance of the people to insist on resignation or impeachment. They have too many regrets. It seems too cruel and humiliating, and would obviously be bad for Richard Nixon, but to argue that it would be bad for America in Mr. Nixon's last 1000 days is palpable nonsense.

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