

A Nation Of Secret- Sharers?

By Tom Wicker

How is it to be explained that while 79 per cent of the 2,000 persons recently polled by the Roper organization believed Richard Nixon guilty of one or more serious charges against him, only 44 per cent of the same persons favored his impeachment?

One explanation, given by a large majority of those opposed to impeachment, was that they feared that such a step would have a destructive effect on the country. This belief was reinforced, no doubt, by the fact that less than half of those polled understood that impeachment is the mere bringing of formal charges against a President, rather than his final removal from office.

The fact remains that a large and representative group of people believe the President guilty of one or more of thirteen specified offenses that appear to be impeachable—helping to cover up the Watergate burglary, for example, or withholding evidence about that event—and yet are not willing to see him either formally charged or removed.

If anything, the belief in Mr. Nixon's guilt probably is stronger today than when the Roper poll was taken. That was in November, before the disclosure of an eighteen-minute gap in one of the controversial White House tapes, and before Mr. Nixon's massive disclosure of his finances—both of which were skeptically received by the public.

Nor can the Roper poll's evidence of a widespread belief in Mr. Nixon's guilt be dismissed as a measure of opinion only in "elitist" circles, or among confirmed anti-Nixon elements. Among groups most critical of Mr. Nixon or most ready to accept his guilt, analysis of the poll discloses,

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were union members, Catholics and blue-collar workers—all of which groups supported him heavily in the 1972 election.

This broad range of belief in Mr. Nixon's guilt—high-income persons, people living in the West, the young, the college-educated and Democrats shared it—raises all the more sharply the question why the same group is not willing to see Mr. Nixon impeached.

One answer is offered by Howard F. Stein of Meharry Medical College in an article in *The American Scholar* for Winter, 1973-74 (although Professor Stein apparently was unaware of the Roper poll while writing). He suggests—to oversimplify a complex thesis—that most of the American people are themselves too often guilty of shortcutting or ignoring the law and ethics; and that while they demand punishment for those who are too openly and violently criminal, or who threaten them, they do not want to punish those who—like themselves—retain a facade of respectability and legality.

Professor Stein writes of the Nixon-McGovern election, "What was sought and what was preserved . . . is a stern veneer and a corrupt core, so that one can get away with as much as possible, while righteously punishing those who get away with too much too openly. The sins of commission must be made on the sly, secretly or vicariously, while the exhortations to decency are made in the piety of public places."

It is interesting to project this thesis onto the fate of Spiro Agnew; ultimately, he not only went a little too far but also admitted his guilt—and even those who had been his greatest admirers were therefore forced to acquiesce in his punishment. But Watergate and Mr. Nixon's response are something else, Professor Stein believes:

"Subversion of the law, lawlessness, secret circumvention of the law—all in the name of law and order—are tactics that Archie Bunker [here used as "caricature and reflection of Everyman"] keeps in his daily repertory, overt and covert. And when he is caught, he resorts either to denial or rationalization." Just so with Mr. Nixon, who also resorted to this "cynicism of everyday life toward one's own everyday deeds: 'We all do it—if we can get away with it, even though we really shouldn't.'"

So, quoting Martin Luther quoting St. Paul (" . . . in judging others, you condemn yourselves, since you do the very things which you condemn"), Professor Stein concludes that Americans have entered into a "silent complicity at Watergate," rather than tacitly condemning themselves by condemning Mr. Nixon.

If so, the moral conundrum posed by Richard Nixon's continued presence at the highest level of public responsibility and visibility is all the more tangled. It's easy enough to say that the people, by being made to face up to Mr. Nixon, ought to be made to face up to themselves; but the greater likelihood may be that they will only turn upon those who face the issue.

Yet, when 79 per cent of a representative public sample believe Mr. Nixon guilty of impeachable offenses, it seems self-evident that some means of fairly trying and resolving the charges against him must be found. If not, the general cynicism about the law surely would be deepened and broadened. And anyone who tolerates or connives at that will sooner or later be just one more victim—and one more sharer—of that cynicism.