

Charles McCabe

Himself

Refuge of Scoundrels?

PATRIOTISM, said Dr. Johnson, is the last refuge of scoundrels. Substitute for patriotism "national security" and you have the nub of a great problem within the American presidency as it has evolved in the late 20th century.

As the idea is now generally accepted, the U.S. President has the power to give wartime powers to himself any time his discretion so declares. By simply announcing to himself that a threat exists to what he has at that moment defined as "the national security," the President has the power to wipe away just about every guarantee of public liberty our Constitution and our traditions allow us.



This is a terrible responsibility for President and people alike, even if the chief executive had the total faith of the electorate. When the faith is less than that, as it has been since the pustule of Watergate broke, the idea of "national security" and what can be done in its name has become frightful and frightening at the same time.

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LAST SUMMER we watched the smarmy Mr. Ehrlichman, as improbable a figure as ever graced the seats of the mighty, assert that the breaking and entering of the office of Dan Ellsberg's psychiatrist was justified on grounds of "national security." The worst part is Ehrlichman plainly believed his own nonsense. All he had to do was to utter the word spy in the same sentence as Ellsberg's name, and Mr. Ellsberg became a "threat to national security."

The end of all this is the point which was reached and passed in the pre-Watergate Nixon Administration. Anyone who didn't like The Boss, was

a political threat to him, could by a witch's wand be made into a threat to national security.

It's not only Mr. Nixon, of course; though he's the only President who had the chutzpah to wage his own secret war in Cambodia without telling ANYBODY except the guys who dropped the bombs. There was Jack Kennedy's highly dubious venture at the Bay of Pigs and the crooked hustling of Congress by Mr. Johnson in the Tonkin Gulf Resolution.

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MR. NIXON is in a long and dishonorable line. This is because the temptations of the "national security" concept are virtually irresistible. If you were told you could do anything you wanted to do, whenever you wanted to do it, without consulting with anybody at all, and you were the most powerful man in the world, how long would you hold out against committing the unspeakable: getting rid of your opposition for the sheer frivolous joy of getting rid of them? No questions asked?

That national security can be truly threatened, and that a President should be able to cope with this threat, if need be in secret, is a given datum. But no man should be allowed a power which is undefined, not in a political system built on the personal liberty of its citizens.

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BENJAMIN FRANKLIN is given credit for words we should never forget in this country: "They that can give up essential liberty to obtain a little temporary safety deserve neither liberty nor safety."

The theory behind the "national security" concept is that citizens are willing to have their liberties expropriated by a President who will save their hides. I do not believe this is a tenable proposition; but there has been damned little evidence advanced to confound it.

People are mesmerized by the word security. To most, it means freedom from muggers. But national security is much more than that. It is the sum of what this country was born with, the faith we have in the institutions we defend. The only way we can show that we want liberty more than security, in the nation and in ourselves, is by singing out the word.