

Charles McCabe

Himself

Grounds for Hope

WHEN I TEND to view the future of my country with dismay, which is more than seldom, and when the dread word apathy starts rattling about in the box of my skull, I try to think of that incredible million messages which descended on Washington after the Saturday night massacre in the fall of '73.

This was the anguished public outpouring after the two top men in the Justice Department were forced out because they refused to fire the man the President had given the brief to find out whether he was, as Mr. Nixon so pungently put it later on "a crook." The master of chutzpah had finally gone too far.



You have to be connected to the media to realize just what one million unsolicited messages mean. This is a country where 12 well-placed telegrams can result in the cancellation of a television show, and 25 strong letters can vitiate an editorial stand taken by a newspaper. Since we are known by our representatives NOT to be a nation of chronic gripers, a strong telegram tends to be multiplied by 10 or 20 by a legislator trying to measure impact.

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WHO WAS MOVED to this massive response? A personal note may not be out of place. On the Sunday following the "Saturday night massacre" I had a lunch date in town with a lady from Marin county. She has been right-wing Republican since the cradle. I am a political agnostic who has been watching Dick Nixon shift his eyes since 1946, when he first entered public life. I doubt the man could be honest in public if he tried.

I called the lady. "I feel just too rotten, let's put lunch off." The lady replied, "Oh, I hoped you would say that. I've never felt more fearful in my life about the country." There were tears in her voice. All over the country it was like that. People came to realize, in the words of former Attorney General Elliot L. Richardson, "that we can no longer tolerate the embezzlement of public trust."

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THERE WAS, too, a feeling of personal insult. That the man in the White House should have calculated that he could dismember the Justice Department, and cut off Archie Cox at the pass, yet somehow get away with it, was asking too much.

I kept hearing myself say, "How long, O Nixon! will you continue to abuse our patience?"

The casting of the morality play had been perfect. Richardson and Cox are no better than the next men; but they were born into the honorable if stuffy tradition of the Boston Brahmins. They were men who were humanly rich and secure enough to act with high honor when the chips were down.

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COX WAS terribly impressive on the telly. For that hour or so he was the reincarnation of the American conscience. With his sober black suit, the jaunty bow tie, the hair en brosse and his repeated easy assertions that there existed a United States which was bigger and better than the creeps who had run the White House until last summer, Cox was grand.

Richardson, you had the feeling, had been forced into decency. He was nonetheless impressive. He had fetched and carried for Mr. Nixon for years; but there was something in his training and background which made him buck up and talk back when the court-martial came.

Mr. Nixon is an essentially rootless man. He couldn't care less for tradition. His essential pieties can be embraced by the sign in his assistant Chuck Colson's office: "Get 'em by the —, and their minds and hearts will follow." That's true; but thank God, it's not all the truth.