

Ex-Nixon Aide: On Joining the Rebellion

By John K. Andrews Jr.

BETHESDA, Md.—Regrettably, after giving voice several years ago to America's "silent majority" on the issue of the Vietnam war, the Nixon White House has now undertaken to cow that majority back into silence by making them doubt their own decent instincts on an even more basic issue—executive responsibility and the rule of law in our democracy.

The line of attack was set by Vice President Ford when he suggested in mid-January in a speech that few Americans other than "extreme partisans" and "super welfare-staters" were prepared to see the President removed from office because of his handling of Watergate and related scandals.

That suggestion is patently untrue; one expects better from the admirable new No. 2 man. In point of fact, the demand for some sort of cure to the gangrenous condition at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue cuts across the whole spectrum of American politics. The open rebellion of conservatives at their recent Washington conclave underscores this. So do the opinion surveys:

Whereas some 61 per cent of the electorate voted for Mr. Nixon's re-election in 1972, as against 39 per cent for George McGovern, the Gallup poll now shows only 42 per cent opposing his resignation, with 47 per cent in favor. Nearly one-third of the President's entire center-right landslide constituency, in other words, no longer has the stomach to say his resignation nay. And for every five votes won by

the ultraliberal Mr. McGovern 15 months ago, six are now being cast for the accession of meat-and-potatoes Mr. Ford, even though that would require the unprecedented trauma of a chief executive quitting in midterm.

Beyond what the cold numbers reveal, I can attest more personally to the bipartisan breadth of dissatisfaction with Mr. Nixon's defiant, fugitive leadership style.

As a conservative, upper middle-class, Midwestern WASP Republican, I was a textbook example of the natural Nixon supporter. As a press aide and speechwriter on the President's staff from the beginning of 1970 to the end of 1973, I was the beneficiary of his fatherly, if never intimate, interest in my work, and I tendered him in return an almost filial affection and loyalty over most of that period. I believed deeply, and still do, in most of what he wanted to do for America and the world. I yield to none in lauding his achievements for peace.

When Watergate began to engulf the White House in 1972, however, the President I so admired was replaced by an ethically numb figure idealism so many of us on his young staff had cherished about American constitutional government. After months of bitter frustration trying to help set matters right from the inside, I finally quit on principle last December.

In rejoining the battle now from the outside, my prayer is still to see him somehow open up, own up, take command of the reformers, and serve

out his term. But like a daily growing plurality of Americans, I am also resigned to the unpleasant imperative of measures to save the Presidency from this President in the event the President continues refusing to be saved from himself.

The man's technical innocence or guilt of crime has long since become sadly irrelevant. Even if not a law-breaker himself, he has run a campaign and an Administration infested with them and has done shockingly little to clean up the mess since it squirmed into the daylight last year. The consequences for public confidence in our institutions have been cataclysmic. Mr. Nixon cannot therefore escape grave blame for, at the minimum, gross negligence of duties to which his constitutional oath binds him.

Thus we face perhaps one of the most clear-cut moral issues that have tormented American domestic politics since slavery was abolished. While the country does, to be sure, still have a President in the literal sense—in Army parlance, a "warm body" still occupies the Oval Office—yet in moral terms the reversed leadership position is quite vacant. One way or another that vacancy must be filled, and quickly.

If, as I still want to believe, the President's sins are those of omission only, he might well win redemption and honorable survival by admitting them and asking for a second chance.

But if they are indeed crimes of commission, as his stubbornly guilty demeanor seems to argue, then—as his own steely-nerved daughter Julie has

conceded—he must go.

So please, Mr. Ford, cool it. We need you untaunted by demagoguery as you wait in the wings. You know in your heart that Mr. Nixon has covered the highest office with dishonor. That failing any new willingness on his part to atone, resignation is one perfectly legitimate remedy, explicitly contemplated by the Founding Fathers in Article II, Section 1 of the Constitution. That his dethroning by impeachment and conviction is another, a remedy surely broad enough to rid us of misgovernment not otherwise removable.

On this last point, of course, the pundits warn us that Congress senses that most people wish Mr. Nixon gone yet recoil from the bloodletting of an impeachment. Sure they do. For once they want Capitol Hill to lead, not be led by, them—and any member of the House or Senate who thinks his duty to constituents consists in mere puppetry to a timid public mood is a discredit to the representative process.

To repeat, the moral vacancy atop the executive branch must be filled. For Congress not to apply the pressure that will fill it, either with qualities summoned up inside the present incumbent or else with the caken character of their own club member, Gerald Ford, can only deepen public cynicism by betraying a similar vacuum on the legislative side. Then, God forbid, what a banana republic we would be.

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