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Governmental Drift

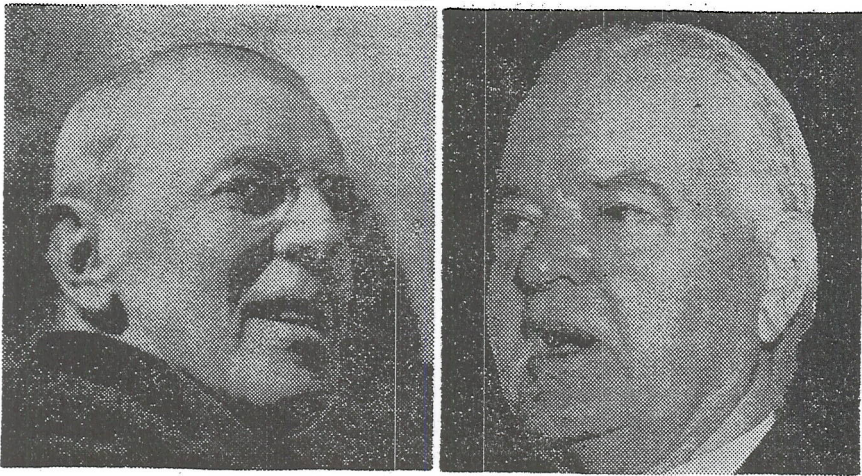
Who's in charge here? More to the point, is *anybody* in charge? Or are we, as a nation, drifting leaderless to some precipice?

Such questions are induced by the seeming abdication of President Nixon from the management of the federal government. Sure, Secretary of State Kissinger continues in diplomatic orbit; the silent silo sitters are at their desks in the missile complexes; Social Security checks get into the mails once a month.

But this capital has a feeling, if I catch the mood, of drift. Mr. Nixon simply is not governing in the accepted sense. True, he appears in television film clips from this podium and that. Messages and reports flow forth in his name. But one has only to look at the struggle of the energy crisis, the long lines at the gas pump, the embattled truckers at their parked rigs, to see that the executive branch of the United States government has, for all practical purposes, come to a halt.

I've been searching for precedents and, in this century, only two come to mind. The first was the final years of Woodrow Wilson, when he lay abed in the White House after a stroke. His wife, by popular belief, ran the administration in those final tragic years "when the cheering stopped." The other is the latter half of Herbert Hoover's administration, when the nation slid into the Great Depression with Hoover insisting that relief for millions of unemployed was the task—yes—of the Red Cross, not the federal government.

Government is by omission as well as by commission. Wilson, waiting out the end of his term, all but disappeared. "None of the Cabinet men saw



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the President, none saw a word in writing save for the handful of frighteningly unfamiliar-looking signatures, and there was nothing beyond the glimpse of him on the South Portico to actually prove that the President even lived," wrote Gene Smith in his book on the last years of Woodrow Wilson. The Senate Foreign Relations Committee finally came to call, to see if he were still alive or at least *compos mentis*. He was both. As Sen. Albert Fall (who would later go to jail for his role in the Teapot Dome scandal) bent over the President's bed and said: "Mr. President, I am praying for you." Wilson responded: "Which way, senator?"

Hoover's dilemma was very different, not physical but mental. He had begun with: "Given a chance to go forward with the policies of the last eight

years we shall soon, with the help of God, be within sight of the day when poverty will be banished from the nation." He ended with shantytowns for the unemployed, all across the nation, dubbed Hoovervilles. The Depression, Hoover asserted, was part of an international debacle. America, he said should free itself "of world influences and make a large measure of independent recovery."

The nation's answer to Wilson was Warren G. Harding; to Hoover, Franklin D. Roosevelt. It made no difference that Harding talked of "normalcy" or FDR of balanced budgets: the country wanted change, not drift.

Of course, the parallels with our cur-

rent condition are not exact. We do have disillusion from a long and costly war, as in 1920. We do have rising unhappiness over the economic condition, as in 1932. But there are perhaps as many differences as similarities between those two eras and today. Yet there is one great, perhaps overriding, sameness: the country has lost confidence in its President. Mr. Nixon stands at 26 per cent in the Gallup Poll; if Dr. George Gallup has been polling in the final Wilson and Hoover years, the percentages doubtless would have been something like that, too.

The battle that Wilson fought and lost had to do with principles of America's international conduct. The one Hoover fought and lost had to do with principles of the government's role in assuring the public welfare. The battle today, in Mr. Nixon's case, is not over principle but over his person, and over the question: Has he so demeaned the presidency and so outraged the public conscience in the exercise of his powers that he should either resign or be removed from office by the constitutional route of impeachment?

Watching the television news night after night and reading the detailed stories morning after morning, one gets the feeling of Mr. Nixon being backed further and further into a corner, one of his own making. His supporters see it as a lynch mob after him. I do not. Sooner or later, after month after month of obfuscation, of twisting and turning and dodging, the President will have to face the bar of justice in the House of Representatives and, perhaps, the Senate. He will either have to spill it all, to produce the tapes and the documents, not just for secret perusal but for public in-

spection, or he will have to accept the popular verdict that he is hiding evidence of guilt.

Whether one sees it as inexorable Greek drama or as High Noon at the OK Corral is immaterial. The crux, the breaking point, one way or the other, is coming, slowly, but surely.

And in the meantime the government drifts. Subordinates do what they can, either of substance, as with Dr. Kissinger, or with make-believe. No one is being fooled. The country knows Mr. Nixon is not governing. He is close to being as paralyzed as Wilson or Hoover.

It is still two years and nine months to the next presidential election, nearly three years to the next inauguration. Congress cannot govern; a Cabinet can function — but not lead. Only a President can set the course and summon the necessary public support, with the concurrence of Congress. Whether Mr. Nixon can ever again govern, as in his first term, is questionable, to put it mildly. Certainly he cannot until the issue of impeachment is resolved one way or the other. And that very likely will consume much of 1974.

This nation survived the last years of Wilson and the final years of Hoover. It will survive the last years of Richard Nixon. But drift is not the natural state of American life. In this case, as in those, it adds to the pressure for change.