

Impeachment: The British System Isn't Any Better

I would like to rebut J.H. Plumb's article on Watergate (January 11). His views are likely to encourage the misconception, common in this country, that the problem revealed by Watergate is excessive executive power and that the British deal with this problem better than the Americans.

Plumb implies that the British political system is better than the American at removing errant executive leaders. This is false. It is true that Parliament used to impeach royal ministers. But it never (except in the revolutionary moments of 1640 and 1688) threatened the king himself, who, as head of the executive, was the functional equivalent of the American President. Both countries, very reasonably, have hesitated to bring down the man who is the linchpin of the whole administration. Equally like the British, we do not hesitate to bring down lesser administrative figures such as Cabinet members, Presidential advisors—and the Vice President.

Further, the American system is certainly more hostile to executive power than the British system today. Parliament practiced impeachment only in the 17th and 18th centuries, when it was in tension with the executive.

Later, parliament became dominant, and the elite of the majority party, acting as the king's Cabinet, came to absorb both legislative and executive power. The party majority now shields ministers from attack more surely than the American system shields any administrative figure except the President. Ministers now almost never resign for reasons of incompetence or unpopularity, only proven law-breaking or scandal (such as the recent sex scandals). Unsuccessful ministers may be shifted to new posts or demoted, but that is the prerogative of the leaders of the majority party, particularly the Prime Minister. Ministers are responsible most immediately to the party, not to parliament or the public.

The American President has no such disciplined party behind him (not even when "his" party "controls" Congress) and no Cabinet with the power to govern both the legislative and executive branches. Congress hardly needs to impeach the members of his administration, since it gets to confirm most of them when they are appointed. It can reject the executive's legislative proposals, as Parliament never does. The President has, it is true, enjoyed too much discretion in foreign policy, but this fact has blinded us to his essential weakness in domestic affairs. He con-

trols far less of the political system than the British Prime Minister and Cabinet do, and the parts he does not control can attack him.

The aspect of Watergate which could not occur in Britain is, not excessive executive power, but a paralyzing struggle between the executive and the rest of the government. This, not the derelictions of Mr. Nixon himself, is what puzzles and dismays the Europeans, who who are used to parliamentary governments. The lessons of Watergate ought to be, not that the President is too strong (he may really be too weak), but that his power should be more coordinated with that of Congress and the judiciary. The Cabinet or party system ought to tie the President and Congress more closely together (without necessarily changing their relative power), so that they agreed on most issues. Then conflicts like Watergate could not arise or would be resolved quickly. The parts of the government would work more completely together.

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