

WXPPost

MAR 22 1974



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Those 'Tough, Unpopular Decisions'

To listen to his remarks, you'd think Richard Nixon is about to be driven out of office because he has taken unpopular, though principled, stands on controversial issues.

Wouldn't it be terrible, he keeps asking, if a President should be forced to abdicate whenever he's down in the polls? He asked it again in his Houston news conference Tuesday night. Then he gave an example of just how terrible it would be:

"You recall [in December 1972] that I found it necessary, because of the breakdown in negotiations in Paris

with the North Vietnamese, to order the bombing on military targets in North Vietnam... The bombing began. We lost planes.

"And at that time, I can assure that not only my friends but many others who had supported the actions that I had taken to attempt to bring the war in Vietnam to an honorable conclusion criticized, and criticized very strongly what I had done..."

"The day after Christmas, some of my closest advisers felt that because a poll that they had taken privately indicated that I had dropped 20 points in the polls since the bombing began, that I should consider stopping it."

Well, naturally he didn't stop it, and naturally the result was, as he tells it, dramatic success. Then:

"Now, I want future Presidents to be able to make hard decisions, even though they think they may be unpopular, even though they think they may bring them down in the polls, even though they may think they may bring them criticism from the Congress which could result in demands that he resign or be impeached.

"I want future Presidents to be able to take the strong right decisions that he believes are right. That's what I did then and that's what I intend to do in the future."

Granted that the bombing of Hanoi and Haiphong was a hard decision, that it was profoundly unpopular and that the President was stuck with it. What does that have to do with the present situation?

Surely he is not suggesting that he faces impeachment now because of his tough, unpopular decisions. Even in the wake of the precipitous 20-point drop in the popularity that he alluded to, the most drastic thing anybody proposed was that he stop the bombing that produced the drop.

I don't recall that anybody even mentioned the words "resignation" or "impeachment" as even his hardcore supporters are doing now. He had made a tough, unpopular decision, and he paid for it in the polls.

Now try to make the analogy to 1974. He's down in the polls, all right, but as a result of what controversial policy?

What principled determination? What tough, unpopular decision?

The tough, unpopular decisions by Mr. Nixon or his aides that have the President down in the polls, and quivering on the brink of impeachment, include these:

- The decision that it is better to continue to cover up high-level involvement in the Watergate scandals than to let the truth come out.

- The decision that it was better to collect an enormous campaign war chest in laundered cash than to disclose who, and how generous, his principal supporters were.

- The decision to time the milk producers' pricing break in such a way as to raise suspicions of a political payoff for political contributions.

- The decision to play funny games with his real estate transactions and taxes.

- The decision to justify a half-million-dollar personal income tax deduction with a back-dated deed.

- The decision to fire his special prosecutor, Archibald Cox, when Cox showed signs of getting too close to the center of the Watergate complexities.

- The decision to withhold tape recordings and other evidence of possible White House wrongdoing followed by the decision to render up incomplete recordings with convenient gaps followed by the decision to show not even the faintest outrage when a panel of experts declared the gaps to be deliberate erasures.

- The decision even now to frustrate the congressional impeachment inquiry while pretending cooperation.

These are hardly the sort of tough decisions that need to be preserved for future Presidents. The talk of future Presidents, in fact, seems little more than an attempt to blur the distinction between the presidency and Richard Nixon, in order to save Richard Nixon.

For it is the incumbent, not the office, who is in trouble. The trouble comes not from the polls but from the fact that he has presided over an administration of unprecedented corruption and because the American people didn't believe him when he said: "I am not a crook."