

Super-Presidency

In his latest efforts to uphold the doctrine of executive privilege, President Nixon is warning that excessive intrusion by Congress or other investigators upon the confidentiality of the Oval Office would leave future Presidents surrounded by a staff of yes-men and eunuchs. At the heart of an extensive report to the Senate Watergate committee by a panel of experts on government is the charge that precisely such a condition did exist in the Nixon White House—not because of any lack of confidentiality but rather because of a dismaying misinterpretation of the Presidency.

The report by the National Academy of Public Administration, a private, nonpartisan agency, places much blame for the Watergate scandals and assorted White House horrors on the long trend toward centralization of Presidential power, capable of bypassing, ignoring or countermanding all governmental agencies. As the Senate hearings demonstrated, that trend has led to creation of an oligarchy of White House aides who function as "assistant Presidents."

Wrong in principle, such a system is also destructive of effective government. The President's cadre, attuned only to his wishes and accountable to no other authority, has been shown, as the panel termed it, "exceedingly thin" in qualifications. These men exercised virtually unchecked power, yet were appallingly deficient in wisdom and experience.

The Nixonian rhetoric about the evil or stupidity of Federal bureaucrats encouraged the palace guard to dictate to, and corrupt, the working departments, agencies and bureaus. The ugly process of politicizing the Justice Department—begun many Administrations ago—approached the level of criminality under Mr. Nixon's command.

Nothing in this dangerous drift calls for fundamental or constitutional changes in the American form of government. Corrective legislation is needed, of course, to police campaign spending and deal with other specific abuses. But the real safeguards against excessive Presidential power lie in a return to the principles and the laws by which the founders intended the nation to be governed.

Perhaps the most basic question raised by Watergate is whether the dismal parade of witnesses at the Senate hearings has aroused the American people to be more demanding of their leaders and of themselves. The report to the Senate committee observes: "Very few of the top witnesses [in the hearings] indicated any sense of understanding or appreciation of democratic ideals or principles. Almost none mentioned any special consideration of public service for the public interest apart from the President's interest."

Such an indictment cuts to the heart of the American condition. Next to it, Mr. Nixon's legalistic protestations about his duty to protect the Presidency fade into nothingness. The Presidency cannot be safe unless democratic ideals and principles are fully understood and firmly lodged in the White House—and in the country.