

# Boxed in by Watergate

By Victor Gold

WASHINGTON — Commenting on Senator James L. Buckley's proposal that Richard M. Nixon resign the Presidency, Speaker Carl Albert said, "with a smile" as it was reported, "I'd like to leave it up to the Republicans to argue that thing out."

Thus did Mr. Albert, who in the past has piously pronounced Watergate an issue beyond partisan consideration, show more of his genuine feelings than an astute politician normally would. Resignation of the President a purely Republican issue? Our Speaker, to borrow a Zieglerism, misspoke himself.

Not that Mr. Albert will be chided for his misspokenmanship. Such gaffes, after all, are considered within the context of their time, and hardly anyone in Washington these days is overly attentive to mere minor slips uttered by major spokesmen. There are already enough major ones to fill the plate.

More than one year after Mr. Nixon, according to Mr. Nixon, was first alerted to what John W. Dean 3d called "a cancer growing on the Presidency," a mild form of delirium afflicts all organs of the American body politic: a side-effect characterized by intermittent flashes of rage, spells of giddiness, variations of St. Clair's Dance and even occasional delusions of normalcy.

Symptom (or is it cause?): Rasha-mon-like, up to this time there exist no fewer than five different versions of what occurred at that single diagnostic meeting in the Oval Office on March 21, 1973. Mr. Dean has given us one version; H. R. Haldeman a second; and Mr. Nixon a third, fourth and fifth.

Mostly by accident but partly by design, the Nixon White House has been proliferating such symptom-cause cells, the better to induce whatever side-effects will keep the country from focusing on what has now become a national cancer.

In some areas of the political right, at least, these efforts have succeeded. This is why the "Buckley manifesto" —to paraphrase the self-conscious macho vernacular of the White House staff—was such a very expensive shot. The Senator stated the obvious when the placebo currently preferred by much of his constituency is obfuscation-with-honor.

Nevertheless, having given Senator Buckley credit for courage, let us say that though his "manifesto" is sound in principle, it is flawed in practicality and, worse yet, premise. For while it is obvious that Mr. Nixon's resignation would excise the primary tumor on the Presidency, it is equally clear that he will not resign because he is under investigation and the office of the

President is his first and most formidable line of legal defense.

To the point: "Executive privilege" is our President's Fifth Amendment. He will never give it up without guarantees of immunity from prosecution—guarantees that would constitute an intolerable writ of imperial privilege. In terms of respect for our system of law, such a cure could only aggravate the disease.

To say this is neither to prejudice Mr. Nixon's case nor deny him the right to a fair hearing. It is simply to cut through obfuscation: The Fifth Amendment by any other name is still the Fifth Amendment, whatever the semantic quackeries of James D. St. Clair and those who would inhibit any and all public utterance of the obvious.

So much for practicality. As for the flawed premise in Mr. Buckley's proposal, the prospect is even grimmer. For the Senator is sadly mistaken in his belief that Mr. Nixon's removal from the Presidency could of itself "free our nation from the particular spiritual crisis" of Watergate. The disease has traveled too far. Even if Mr. Nixon were to follow the Senator's counsel and resign, Gerald R. Ford, as President, would within six weeks find his administration immersed in the very orgy of political revanchism that Mr. Buckley feared as a consequence of impeachment.

From the right, there would be re-crimination, not only for the resigned President's fate but for whatever action his successor might take in carrying forward an investigation that must continue, regardless of who sits in the Oval Office.

And from the left, once Mr. Nixon as a private citizen stood naked before his enemies, there would come draconian calls for unrelenting pursuit of all Nixon affairs, even back to his first Congressional campaign, in 1946.

Indeed, of all the side effects produced by the country's Watergate agony, none is so illusory as that which deludes us into believing that Richard M. Nixon's departure from the Presidency will bring fast, fast relief. There is no quick Watergate cure, for the cancer has grown beyond the Presidency or the man.

Mr. Nixon will go — whether by resignation, impeachment-conviction, or, as he insists, no earlier than high noon, Jan. 20, 1977. But Watergate will be with the American body politic for a long time to come. It is part of our historical pathology now, and barring a Ministry of Truth come 1984, such truths cannot be easily excised.

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