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But Is Mr. Nixon Viable?

By Tom Wicker

It must have been a relief to Richard Nixon not to be heckled, as he has been recently in some American appearances, by the street crowds in Paris; and it must have been almost like old times to have other world leaders coming by to pay their respects, and to make plans with them for exchanges of visits.

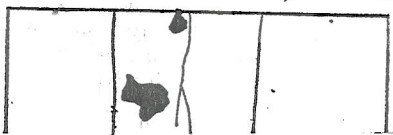
The understandable gratification felt by Mr. Nixon and his staff, however, and the terms in which they expressed it, make it timely once again to draw a distinction between Mr. Nixon himself and the institutional Presidency of the United States. This is a distinction that frequently eludes high White House occupants in any Administration, and the Nixon White House has been particularly blind to it.

Thus, General Haig, reflecting on the visit to Paris originally intended to be only for the funeral of Georges Pompidou, concluded:

"It was very evident that European leaders and world leaders with whom the President met continue to look to the United States and President Nixon as an essential factor in the realization of the continuing efforts to develop a structure for stable international environment." (Italics added.)

This suggests that "the United States and President Nixon" are as one, at least in the conduct of diplomacy, and there is something to be said for that view. American history, particularly in the twentieth century, has amply demonstrated that in the field of foreign policy a President has no peer; the nation's foreign policy is largely the President's foreign policy. And even if it is true that he has to maintain a certain level of popular and Congressional support for that policy, in most cases a President is amply endowed

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with the means of generating that support.

General Haig, falling back on one of the workhorse words of bureaucratise, also used the occasion of the Paris exchanges to say to reporters that "a viable Presidency is a cornerstone of world security." This completely eliminates the distinction between man and office. Did the general mean that the institutional function of the office over many years and all Administrations was such a cornerstone? Or was the specific Presidency of Richard Nixon the cornerstone he actually had in mind? Or both?

(If it was Mr. Nixon's Presidency to which General Haig referred, "viable" may have been good bureaucratise but a political gaffe; in the dictionary, "viable" means "able to survive," which is just about all anybody outside the White House expects Mr. Nixon to do.)

And of course other world leaders in Paris still showed respect for Mr. Nixon, as White House staff men claimed. Not only are his achievements among nations considerable (although in some cases, particularly "peace with honor," grotesquely inflated); but he is still the statutory President of the United States, and may well be for nearly three years.

Since the United States, economically and militarily, is at least one of the two strongest nations in the world, and is probably the strongest, no other head of government is likely to show disrespect for its statutory leader, or to refuse to deal with him, or to disregard altogether his leadership and initiatives.

But the question is whether all this means that Richard Milhous Nixon is inseparable from the Presidency. If Mr. Nixon were suddenly not in office, would the Presidency no longer be "viable"—that is, would the office be unable to survive? Would the "United States and President Nixon as an essential factor" have been removed from the search for a "stable international environment?" Or just Mr. Nixon himself?

The answers are self-evident. Mr. Nixon's long experience in world affairs, his intellectual grasp of the subject, the expertise obtained in five years as President, and his generally cordial relations with other leaders, would undoubtedly be missed if he left office. But every President leaves office sooner or later, and the possibility of any President's death is always with us.

If Mr. Nixon leaves office before his term ends, his statutory powers will descend immediately upon Gerald Ford. Mr. Ford surely would retain Secretary of State Kissinger and other members of the Administration, at least for long enough to establish an effective transition. No such abrupt change at the top—whether by death, resignation or removal—would be easy or happy; but the nation and the Presidency would survive. Even world peace, such as it is, might turn out to be viable.