

A Line Future Presidents

Cross at Their Peril

By William Greider

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The demon scandal, a trifle which became the nation's choking obsession, has been exorcised now. But we, the people who elected him President, will share the humiliation of citizen Nixon.

Our democratic republic has never been here before, not in its 198 years and surely never again in the future. A President, elected by an imposing landslide, is toppled in a unique disgrace, his resignation demanded by political consensus. His successor was chosen with the consent of Congress, but not by popular election.

Sodden with shock and scandal, the nation engulfs its new leader in a surge of goodwill and hope, but that will not quite erase the lingering fear, the bitterness and uncertainty, from the chapter just closed.

What has it done to us as a nation? To our government and the way it normally functions? It was like a great experiment in open-heart surgery, painful but presumed necessary for the survival of constitutional government. Now that it is over, will the patient be his old self again or weak and dispirited?

"The civil liberties case of the century," proclaimed the ACLU, one of the early rallying centers for impeachment. But Patrick Buchanan, a faithful aide to the last, insists that ultimately Richard Nixon's transgressions will be judged "historically trivial," especially measured against his accomplishments.

"An immense shot has been fired across the bow of the Presidency," the conservative editor, William Rusher, declared with satisfaction. Others are not so sure. They do not see how one summer of ultimate confrontation will permanently alter the dominance of the strong chief executive over his equals in Congress.

These are deep and essentially unanswerable questions made even more fuzzy by the way the story ended. The stately constitutional process of impeachment and trial was aborted without a judgment, without even a formal charge voted by the House of Representatives. That leaves a rich field of imponderables for revisionist historians to harvest in future generations, second-guessing the role of every institution; the White House and Congress, public opinion and the press.

But the future will be nagged by one overpowering question, just as we are now. Did it really have to end so tragically? Couldn't the President have saved himself, as it seemed he would at a half-dozen turns along the road? If only he had told the truth.

"What really hurts in matters of this sort," Richard M. Nixon once said, "is not the fact that they occur, because over-zealous people in campaigns do things that are wrong. What really hurts is if you try to cover it up."

That was early in the story, at a press conference on Aug. 29, 1972, when he was assuring the nation that a full investigation satisfied him of White House innocence in the political burglary at the Watergate. The people believed him and that fall they gave him 61 per cent of their votes. We know now that he deceived them.

At another point, during one of those private dialogues which the world has now read, Richard Nixon was musing aloud about his old bete noire, Alger Hiss, the government scandal of 1948, which propelled Nixon from obscure California congressman to national political celebrity.

"Hiss was destroyed," Nixon reminded his aides, "because he lied — perjury."

At the end, when the President reluctantly provided the evidence which clinched the case against him, the missing tape which proved his role in the Watergate cover-up, his belated candor was the coup de grace, self-inflicted.

"This was a serious action of omission," the President confessed too late, "for which I take full responsibility and which I deeply regret."

Could the President have told the truth and survived, early on in the

Watergate scandal or even later? It would have been costly at any point in the saga. To tell the truth would have meant exposing his closest aides and political friends to criminal jeopardy, Bob Haldeman and John Ehrlichman and John Mitchell, to name a few. In mid-campaign, the summer of 1972, that seemed unthinkable and, indeed, the Nixon White House never considered any other strategy but concealment.

The truth, at any turn, would have unearthed enormously embarrassing, even criminal episodes from Nixon's first term — burglary and wiretapping and a consistent disregard for the Bill of Rights. The truth might have plunged Nixon into a viper's nest of accusations, as one White House subordinate blamed another, all the way up the line to the President himself.

In the end, that bitter unraveling of accomplices occurred anyway. If Nixon had seized the truth as his weapon, fully admitted complicity and promised an aggressive cleansing of the White House, it might have cost him the election of 1972 or, later on, the presidency. But it is also easy to imagine that the public would have forgiven and that Congress would have backed

away from impeachment, a painful chore it never wanted anyway.

"Contrition is bullshit," his press secretary, Ronald Ziegler, remarked early on, when someone in the White House proposed the truth as the best defense. Ziegler's boss paid dearly for choosing the stone wall instead.

As it is, Richard Nixon's political legacy may be the one engraved for history in Specification Eight of Article I of the impeachment charges approved by the House Judiciary Committee. It accused Nixon of the following:

"Making false or misleading public statements for the purpose of deceiving the people of the United States into believing that a thorough and complete investigation had been conducted with respect to allegations of misconduct on the part of personnel of the executive branch . . ."

When you think about it, that is an extraordinary statement for one group of politicians to make about another of their own kind. Their profession understands, perhaps better than others, that one man's truth is another's mendacity. Political honesty is a perishable standard of conduct. It sounds almost

quaint against America's recent history, when every cold war president from Eisenhower to Johnson, has been nailed in a major deception on the most vital subject, war and peace. The U-2 incident, the Bay of Pigs, the war in Indochina.

Even the House Judiciary Committee could not bring itself to impeach Nixon for deceiving the public on another matter, the secret bombing raids into neutral Cambodia in 1969.

The House and Senate were silent on that one. As many of the congressmen pointed out, they should have known what was happening. How could Congress cry rape, when it was such a willing victim?

Still, the old-fashioned business of honesty is one moral imperative that might be salvages from this ugly chapter. It might post the homely rule we teach our children as a warning to all future presidents and president's men who set out to manipulate opinion or conceal the truth on any public issue: Honesty is the best policy.

"There's a funny thing about this place," Rep. Richard Bolling, the reformist congressman from Missouri, was saying about the House of Representa-

37 American Presidents and Vice Presidents

President		Vice President
1. George Washington	Apr. 30, 1789-Mar. 3, 1797	1. John Adams
2. John Adams	Mar. 4, 1797-Mar. 3, 1801	2. Thomas Jefferson
3. Thomas Jefferson	Mar. 4, 1801-Mar. 3, 1805	3. Aaron Burr
4. James Madison	Mar. 4, 1805-Mar. 3, 1809	4. George Clinton
5. James Monroe	Mar. 4, 1817-Mar. 3, 1825	5. Elbridge Gerry
6. John Quincy Adams	Mar. 4, 1825-Mar. 3, 1829	6. Daniel D. Tompkins
7. Andrew Jackson	Mar. 4, 1829-Mar. 3, 1833	7. John C. Calhoun
8. Martin Van Buren	Mar. 4, 1837-Mar. 3, 1841	8. Martin Van Buren
9. William Henry Harrison	Mar. 4, 1841-Apr. 4, 1841	9. Richard M. Johnson
10. John Tyler	Apr. 6, 1841-Mar. 3, 1845	10. John Tyler
11. James K. Polk	Mar. 4, 1845-Mar. 3, 1849	11. George M. Dallas
12. Zachary Taylor	Mar. 5, 1849-July 9, 1850	12. Millard Fillmore
13. Millard Fillmore	July 10, 1850-Mar. 3, 1853	13. William R. King
14. Franklin Pierce	Mar. 4, 1853-Mar. 3, 1857	14. John C. Breckinridge
15. James Buchanan	Mar. 4, 1857-Mar. 3, 1861	15. Hannibal Hamlin
16. Abraham Lincoln	Mar. 4, 1861-Mar. 3, 1865	16. Andrew Johnson
17. Andrew Johnson	Apr. 15, 1865-Mar. 3, 1869	17. Schuyler Colfax
18. Ulysses S. Grant	Mar. 4, 1869-Mar. 3, 1873	18. Henry Wilson
19. Rutherford B. Hayes	Mar. 4, 1877-Mar. 3, 1881	19. William A. Wheeler
20. James A. Garfield	Mar. 4, 1881-Sept. 19, 1881	20. Chester A. Arthur
21. Chester A. Arthur	Sept. 20, 1881-Mar. 3, 1885	21. Thomas A. Hendricks
22. Grover Cleveland	Mar. 4, 1885-Mar. 3, 1889	22. Levi P. Morton
23. Benjamin Harrison	Mar. 4, 1889-Mar. 3, 1893	23. Adlai E. Stevenson
24. Grover Cleveland	Mar. 4, 1893-Mar. 3, 1897	24. Garret A. Hobart
25. William McKinley	Mar. 4, 1897-Mar. 3, 1901	25. Theodore Roosevelt
26. Theodore Roosevelt	Sept. 14, 1901-Mar. 3, 1905	26. Charles W. Fairbanks
27. William H. Taft	Mar. 4, 1905-Mar. 3, 1909	27. James S. Sherman
28. Woodrow Wilson	Mar. 4, 1913-Mar. 3, 1921	28. Thomas R. Marshall
29. Warren G. Harding	Mar. 4, 1921-Aug. 2, 1923	29. Calvin Coolidge
30. Calvin Coolidge	Aug. 3, 1923-Mar. 3, 1925	30. Charles G. Dawes
31. Herbert C. Hoover	Mar. 4, 1925-Mar. 3, 1929	31. Charles Curtis
32. Franklin D. Roosevelt	Mar. 4, 1929-Mar. 31, 1933	32. John N. Garner
33. Harry S. Truman	Mar. 4, 1933-Jan. 20, 1941	33. Henry A. Wallace
34. Dwight D. Eisenhower	Jan. 20, 1941-Jan. 20, 1945	34. Harry S. Truman
35. John F. Kennedy	Jan. 20, 1945-Apr. 12, 1945	35. Alben W. Barkley
36. Lyndon B. Johnson	Apr. 12, 1945-Jan. 20, 1949	36. Richard M. Nixon
37. Richard M. Nixon	Jan. 20, 1949-Jan. 20, 1953	37. Lyndon B. Johnson
	Jan. 20, 1953-Jan. 20, 1961	38. Hubert H. Humphrey
	Jan. 20, 1961-Nov. 22, 1963	39. Spiro T. Agnew
	Nov. 22, 1963-Jan. 20, 1965	40. Gerald R. Ford
	Jan. 20, 1965-Jan. 20, 1969	
	Jan. 20, 1969-Aug. 9, 1974	

tives. "But most of us believe you're supposed to be honest. We really do. I know a lot of people have a different opinion of politicians. You can be almost any kind of a person up here, but your respect rests on your word."

Beyond that general sentiment, it is much harder to define precisely how this experience will change the network of mutual consent by which the government usually functions, the established relations between the three branches and the level of tolerance for irregular behavior.

Congress, as far as it went, drew a line in the dust which future presidents will cross at their peril, but the warning was blurred by the final settlement. In effect, the political community decided across party lines that impeachment and putting an incumbent president in the dock would be too traumatic to endure—so the constitutional procedure was short-circuited by general agreement.

When all of the fanfare fades away the enduring precedents will boil down to those 27-to-11 roll calls in the House Judiciary Committee where a bipartisan majority hammered out language for three articles of impeachment just 10 days ago. What they were saying was a conservative message essentially, despite the trauma of the process. It sought to restrain government power, to restore lost values.

Don't tamper with the processes of justice, especially when political associates are in trouble. Don't try to manipulate sensitive agencies like the IRS or the FBI or the CIA, especially for narrow political motives. Don't assume that the cloak of "executive privilege" will conceal the excesses of White House operatives.

Even liberal commentators, who are inclined to support a strong presidency and to blame these crimes on the peculiar character of Richard Nixon, speak hopefully of reining in the "imperial presidency." Conservatives are apt to say, we told you so, insisting that Nixon and his men only mimicked and exaggerated the qualities of excessive power that they saw in their predecessors.

To appreciate the conservative impact of these warnings, ask some questions about the future:

Would it be impeachable, for instance, if a future President authorized or merely condoned a vast network of Army spies dispatched to chase after his domestic political critics?

Would he risk a constitutional showdown with Congress if, for instance, the CIA were permitted to infiltrate domestic institutions — labor unions, universities, foundations, law firms — spreading around huge sums of secret subsidies which, in effect, bought the loyalty of private organizations?

Would a future President be in jeopardy if the FBI wiretapped a prominent black leader and peddled the scandalous materials to newspapers? Or if FBI agents used burglary as an investigative tool?

Those things all happened, of course, before Nixon — under Eisenhower, Kennedy or Johnson. They produced temporary sensations, but neither Congress nor the public was alarmed enough to punish anyone. All of those episodes and many others which threatened civil liberties were explained away under the rubric of "national security." That phrase has been so tattered by the Nixon years that it is hard to imagine future administrations will use it so loosely.

Still, the case against Nixon seemed larger in the headlines than it did in the Judiciary Committee's final verdict. They would not have impeached him, for instance, for the close intermingling of campaign money and government policy-making as in the milk case. Nor for the peddling of ambassadorships by his personal attorney. Nor, strictly speaking, for the fact that so many of his closest subordinated had broken the law.

Congress in the 20th century would not buy the higher standard of presi-

dential responsibility propounded by Madison in 1789, namely, that he must answer for the people he supervises.

Beyond those specific precedents, the most important question is whether this summer of crisis will permanently alter the chemistry between Congress and the White House. Even the most hopeful congressional reformers are hesitant about that. Perhaps, they say, this experience will create a new self-esteem on Capitol Hill, a new sense of prerogatives, which will lead to other challenges on lesser issues.

But the dynamics that produced a dominant presidency in modern times are not altered by Richard Nixon's sudden surrender to the threat of impeachment and removal. "Once this thing is resolved," White House assistant Pat Buchanan predicted smugly last week, "the Congress won't be the center of action. The reporters won't be standing outside the Majority Leader's office. They'll be back in the White House pressroom, because this is where the action is and where the decisions are made."

Even congressional reformers like Bolling concede that one season of courage won't change things, unless congressmen and senators are prepared to reorganize internally, modernizing their own decision-making and consigning genuine power to their own leaders.

James L. Sundquist of the Brookings Institution suspects that most congressmen really prefer life the way it has been.

"If they relinquish power to the President," Sundquist explained, "they can stand on the sidelines and heckle. If they delegate power to their own leadership, then they're responsible for it."

Congress, after all, clearly didn't want this confrontation. Like all of the players, it got caught in an inexorable flow of events which moved forward beyond anyone's full control. Nixon's strategy assumed that, when the clash came, he could stare down the House Judiciary Committee, the way Presidents have so often prevailed in a raw test of wills. He gambled wrong.

"He backed us into a corner," said Rep. Jim Wright of Texas, "and a lot of guys who didn't thrill at the prospect of a contest were in a position where they had to put up or shut up. Or you lose your own self-respect and respect for the institution."

So the important impact may be, at the other end of Pennsylvania Avenue — a less awesome presidency, perhaps, but nothing so fundamental as congressional domination. In the general numbness, it is hard to remember how much we have learned about the White House in the last few months.

Coarse cynicism and profane hypocrisy and frail human fears were all hiding behind the presidential symbol. Richard Nixon, the most secretive of modern leaders, became the most expose. He tarnished the common public conception of the Chief Executive with those transcripts of his private dialogues and it will be a while before the magic and majesty are convincing again.

"By the 20th century," George Reedy wrote long before Watergate, "the presidency had taken on all the regalia of monarchy except for ermine robes, a scepter and crown. The President was not to be jostled by a crowd — unless he elected to subject himself to do so . . ."

Pat Buchanan, watching the Nixon tragedy, predicted grimly that "the new puritanism is going to be short-lived." Certainly, Nixon's successors could assemble the same elements in the White House which produced Watergate — the fabric of secrecy, the anonymous advisers with so much power, the habit of closely-held decision-making. Perhaps, as Buchanan insists, Mr. Nixon's liberal critics will forget all about the "imperial" White House if one of their own kind ever takes possession of it again.

Still the warning is clear enough if only future leaders will heed it. America did not want a king, not in the beginning and not in the summer of 1974.