

Hoffman

Glass Houses

Washington

UPON THE FALL of tyrants, bad rulers and vicious magistrates there is a traditional dancing in the streets and a joyful expectation that now, at last, a solution to the community's worst problems is at hand. Thus it was in Lisbon and Athens last month.

Last week we were wondering when the Congressional mob seizes on Nixon, whom its members so much resemble, will there be dancing in the streets here also? Assuredly, they will dance on Wall Street, but on the other thoroughfares of America we might serve ourselves better by practicing some form of contrite contemplation.



Nicholas Von Hoffman

Not only did we elect the man, but we reelected him and did the same for the Congress, which with but a very few exceptions approved his appointment of a chain of knaves and crooks to the highest offices. More than that, we ourselves obeyed and supported the man through foul war and vile peace until even our dedicated obtuseness cracked under the weight of volumes of evidence.

So the question now is not whether Nixon is guilty but whether we are a nation of docile slobs. Nixon was not the creature of a Greek junta or a Portuguese coup, but of our own political culture.

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BUT NO MATTER what form the abuse of office takes, many of us have known what's going on for a long time. How can any adult American pretend to be shocked by revelations about campaign contributions? Where in Sam Hill did we think that money was coming from? From "the little people"? How many people do you personally know who have ever made a political contribution unless it was to get a paving

contract? We knew, we've known all along.

But we didn't know better. Americans were referring to politicians as a bunch of crooks 75 years before Nixon, but we return them to office and obey them, for our part of the political culture is obedience and a suspicion of any serious criticism uttered outside the barroom.

It is not too much of an exaggeration to say that most of such serious criticism about the way we run our public affairs comes from half-maddened, incoherent criminals — late-adolescent psychos like the Symbionese Liberation Army or street muggers from the ghetto. The civil rights movement had to violate the law before it was taken seriously, as did the anti-war people. The ordinary political processes had no room to accommodate such questions until the people raising them broke and entered.

The rest of us support the state, pay our taxes, allow the government to assign us a serial number so it can trace our every activity, and give such loyalty that we feel vaguely guilty for not voting for the same wretches we privately are so contemptuous of. On public occasions we even go through the motions of praying for the scoundrels.

How did we, who think of ourselves as the most individualistic of people, come to take such an acquiescent role in our political culture? Why are we so accepting?

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PART OF that answer may lie in our schools, where the child first meets the state. "Political socialization studies have found that children learned in elementary school that good citizenship meant obeying the law. In other words, the children rejected an active citizenship for one that was passive and obedient... their attitudes were like a woman I once heard who suggested that all people should be fingerprinted by the government. After all, she stated, 'if you are good and obey the law, it won't matter.'" The quote is from Joel H. Spring in "The Twelve Year Sentence, Radical Views of Compulsory Schooling" (edited by William S. Rickenbacker, Open Court Press).

But speculation about what brought us to cashier our President will probably be brief and none too loud. He will be dismissed as an aberration, an evil piece of luck who was unmasked precisely because of the health of our political institutions. There will be much proclaiming that the system works, and we shall dance in the streets. But the real lesson will be learned by the next Nixon, who will have figured out how to finesse it.

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