



No Coups ... No Tanks ... No Mobs

As Richard Nixon was saying farewell, I remembered something in my briefcase, something I had put into a folder of miscellany over a month ago, before the House Judiciary Committee hearings, before the President's admission of guilt with the release of the last tapes. It was a long excerpt from a speech by Secretary of Commerce Frederick Dent. Some headline writer had fixed on the article this echo of the White House's own (at least then) line of defense: **THE WORLD CAN'T DO WITHOUT PRESIDENT NIXON.**

Now the world was preparing to do just that; on the screen he was already a ghost of a President. Suddenly he was gone, and all we saw was something he couldn't take with him: the seal of the office of the President of the United States. It stays. The power is in the office, and no one takes it with him.

I found the clipping in my briefcase and read it again. Mr. Dent's argument went like this: The four-year term assures continued leadership by giving Presidents "the luxury of becoming unpopular while in office" when they feel the need to pursue a course the public temporarily disagrees with. Congress should follow the course prescribed in the Constitution, but the President should not resign, for that would "open our generation to the charge of having damaged, perhaps permanently, the government of this great nation."

ORDERLY SUCCESSION

Men delude themselves this way. Presidents' men can be especially vulnerable, as if the whole history of this country were a blank to them. For nothing has proven so durable in our system as the orderly succession of the Presidency according to the constitutional process. In this century alone, it has persisted through Presidential assassination, incapacitation and incompetence; it has survived depression, wars and scandals, including now the revelation that an incumbent himself has been involved, by his own words, in obstructing justice.

All this, and no coups. No tanks surround the White House, no one gets arrested and spirited away overnight—neither the President's men nor their adversaries. No mobs take to the streets. Instead, at noon on a Friday, a man from Grand Rapids, Mich., a man rather like most of us, with no great pretensions, lifts his hand, repeats an oath now almost 200 years old and succeeds the man "the world can't do without."

Gerald Ford has never been elected

to national office, but no one will go to court to say he doesn't belong there, no political faction will connive to claim his power illegitimate. Even before his swearing-in—at some incalculable moment when the people realized Richard Nixon was finished—national consensus prepared to accept his authority.

AUTOMATIC SHIFT

I remember the last time it happened. The circumstances were grimmer: John F. Kennedy had been murdered. I served in a junior position in his Administration, was in Texas when he was killed and hurried instinctively to the side of the man who would succeed him—a man for whom I had once worked: Lyndon Johnson. The new President had not been sworn in when I reached the plane, but as if by silent command the whole apparatus of government was already deferring to him. It was an automatic and mechanistic shift, as if an alternate generator had gone instantly into action when the main power source failed. "Where's Vice President Johnson?" I asked of a Secret Service agent at the ramp. "The President's in the middle compartment," he answered instinctively. There was no mystery to it. Oath or no oath, the agent accepted without challenge the mandate of an arrangement made two centuries earlier and contained in a document he probably hadn't read since high school.

So did the rest of the nation. Lyndon Johnson did, too, although he was shaken and uncertain about the protocol of the circumstances; when I walked into his quarters on Air Force One, he looked as Gerald Ford looked all through the day before Richard Nixon resigned. I started to greet him, "Mr. President—" only to be interrupted as he said quietly: "Not yet." But it was so, and he couldn't even wait for the oath to start making decisions.

"Kennedy is dead," he said, addressing his words to no one in particular. "The rest of the world will wonder if we're going to steer sharply off course. Those fellows in the Kremlin must be wondering. The Negroes at home, especially—they'll think a Southern President will just naturally be against 'em. And I'll bet Don Cook and his crowd are sitting up there wondering what the hell to expect now [Donald Cook, chief executive of American Electric Power Co., was a businessman whom the new President considered a good mirror of the enlightened business community].

I've got to show the whole bunch of 'em that a steady hand's on the wheel. And I don't know how to do that except to take up where Kennedy left off."

He did just that. "Let us continue," he said to a grieving people, and by just about everyone's account, the transition was among his finest hours.

All this comes back as I watch Gerald Ford on television. He is in front of his house in Alexandria, Va. Richard Nixon's speech is over. In my hand is Secretary Dent's speech, setting forth the argument that Richard Nixon's resignation would inspire efforts to repudiate the last election. It won't happen. I let the clipping fall into the waste basket. Ford is a man who voted against almost every piece of legislation I worked to enact in the '60s. We are poles apart politically and he will undoubtedly work to carry forward the policies Richard Nixon espoused in 1972, policies which were aborted not by liberal opposition but by the corruption of his own stewardship. But the Presidency is in Ford's hands now, legitimately, and that's the important thing. The long and unsettling process of watching one President destroy himself in public is over, and the foundations of the state, which seemed so often in jeopardy, have held. Somehow I think this man on the screen is a reminder that the guarantees of the founding covenant, when honored, do work.

It is late now. The screen is dark. I think of something George Washington wrote, when he warned against the disease of factionalism which gradually inclines the minds of men "to seek security and repose in the absolute power of an individual: and sooner or later, the chief of some prevailing faction, more able or more fortunate than his competitors, turns this disposition to the purposes of his own elevation on the ruins of public liberty." To dampen the spirit of factionalism and its effects on the continuity of our traditions: there is the seed of a mandate. It sounds simple and quaint for these modern times. Yet I wonder; watching people milling around, not wanting to go home, although there is nothing more to say, I sense they yearn for a season of first things.

A White House aide under LBJ, Moyers most recently ran a weekly program on public television.