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Watergate: Its Effect on Children

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For all the millions of words written about Watergate, little has been said about the scandal's presumed effect upon children. There is, however, some reason to believe it has been a shattering and destructive experience. Some child experts fear the long-range result will be a generation of Americans much less responsive to conventional political authority, and perhaps all forms of authority, for years to come.

While it may be arguable just how lasting the damage will be, the immediate impact seems clear. The young traditional idealistic notions about a just government serving the people have given way to a revulsion and synicism remarkably similar to that shared by many adult Americans. Most of all, the revelations of White House wrongdoing seem to have dramatically reduced respect for the presidency and undermined the long-held image of the President as the country's omnipotent and wise father figure. In short, children now know the President can be as much of a scoundrel as anyone else.

Given the magnitude of the crimes, such findings may not seem surprising. What is surprising, though, is the depth of the disillusionment, extending even to the kindergarten level where some tots have evidently taken to expressing their feelings in drawings of a mean-faced Richard Nixon and other villainous characters. My own interest in the subject was aroused after overhearing several neighborhood youngsters ridiculing Mr. Nixon. I suspected this might be a local aberration, since my 11-year-old son's Bethesda school class included the children of two Watergate figures as well as the offspring of three reporters covering Watergate. But it was, I soon discovered, no aberration.

The principal problem faced by children is reconciling what they have been taught with facts. Numerous studies have shown that a child's first awareness of the political system is of the President. The model has universally been that of a man seen as virtually infallible, who protected the country against all evil. Political Scientists David Easton of the University of Chicago and Jack Dennis of the University of Wisconsin, who interviewed 12,000 children in a 1969 nationwide study, were unable to find a single one who did not hold the President in the highest esteem.

In contrast, an updated post-Watergate survey by Christopher Arterton of Massachusetts Institute of Technology revealed a startling reversal in attitudes. Taking an upper class Boston suburb which bucked the statewide Massachusetts support for George McGovern by going for Mr. Nixon 2-1, Arterton analyzed the feelings of 367 children in the third, fourth and fifth grades. The response was totally negative. The children regarded Mr. Nixon's conduct as disgraceful and by an overwhelming majority advocated his impeachment. Writing in Political Science Quarterly shortly before Mr. Nixon's resignation, Arterton concluded that "the once benevolent leader has been transformed into the malevolent leader by the impact of current events; and there can be little doubt that these children have come to view the President as a figure to be strenuously rejected."

The Boston results are confirmed by other studies which show the rejection embraces all socio-economic groups. Moreover, a Virginia survey last spring disclosed a greater interest in day-by-day developments than might be imagined. A series of essays by elementary and junior high school pupils taking educational television courses revealed detailed knowledge of such things as tape gaps, illegal bugging, legal maneuvering and Mr. Nixon's taxes. While this undoubtedly reflected Watergate's prominence in the news, it also indicated an extraordinary understanding of events—and their meaning. As a seventh grade Hopewell, Va., boy put it: "Watergate has made our government a disaster area."

With Mr. Nixon now removed from office, one might reasonably expect much of the youthful disillusionment to disappear. There is, however, a serious new impediment in President Ford's pardon of his predecessor. Professor Arterton believes children see this "as a put-up job which perpetuates the cover-up and all the other terrible things that have occurred." Several teachers in the Washington area also detect disappointment. "Here was someone children felt maybe they could trust to do what was right, only to find they couldn't count on the new President anymore than the old one," says Mrs. Barbara Bennett, a Montgomery County elementary teacher.

One thing is certain. A severe blow has been dealt to the age-old adage that Johnny, too, can grow up to be President by studying hard, being honest and playing fair and square. "How can you tell a youngster that?" asks Carlotta Miles, a Washington child psychiatrist. "The President has been the consistent embodiment of goodness and rightness for so long that no one ever thought of the confusion that would be created in youthful minds by something like Watergate. The pardon has added to the confusion by making it appear that Presidents can do bad things and not be punished like other people. So, if you're a child, you believe you only have to tell the truth and be honest when you're small, not when you grow up."

Dr. Miles foresees more trouble for parents in instilling ethics. She fears the development of a healthy superego will be more difficult for children. As the agency of the mind that sets standards of right and wrong, the superego's foundation is laid in the formative years. "The differences in behavior must be learned and reinforced from the adults in the child's environment," says Dr. Miles. "The parents are the main teachers, but outside of his immediate world are other figures of respect and power—teachers, ministers, parents of friends, doctors and at the top of the list, the President, who the children feel got there because he, like their parents, could be relied upon to always know and teach."

With the idealization of the presidency gone, it is hardly surprising that there also would be overlapping doubts about the integrity of the entire political system. "If the people can't trust the head of their government, who can they trust?" asked a sixth grade Madison Heights, Va., girl. "There is nothing for the people to put their confidence in anymore," wrote a Schuyler, Va., boy. The Virginia survey suggests students view Watergate as part of a broader pattern of government failure and many have come to share the adult concern about an overly-powerful government disregarding constitutinonal safeguards. Some, in fact, are being turned off in a fashion reminiscent of college students in the mid-1960s. "Corruption of officials in high offices are becoming more frequent and justice does not prevail," wrote a fifth grade Charles City, Va., girl in expressing a common theme. "A Vice President can be bribed and get off with a fine and resignment. Our President can juggle his taxes and only get a reprimand. Subpoenas are ignored and no one is sent to jail. In direct opposition of this, a 17-year-old college student is sentenced to two years in prison for taking a beaten-up chair from an abandoned house. A mother of five is given a year for shoplifting a pair of scissors needed to make clothes for them." Small wonder that such inconsistencies would lead another fifth grader from Chesterfield, Va., to conclude that "it seems our whole government is a crook in some way or another."

To be sure, some children see a brighter side ot what has happened. "Watergate has made it possible for us to see what can happen when government officials and leaders get too much power," said a seventh grade Bridgewater, Va., girl. A number took comfort in the historical record. "Of course, we have made mistakes, but we have always improved upon our system," wrote a seventh grade Blackstone, Va., girl. "Scandals have occurred throughout the years, but the people have united and worked together to keep our country the best on earth."

But for others, the disillusionment is real and deep. The obvious question is whether it will have lasting consequences. Most authorities suspect it surely will. Arterton's polling of elementary pupils found diminished faith in politicians at all levels—that they are now seen as "more selfish, less intelligent, more dishonest and less likely to keep their promises." Compared to previous studies, the latest results "uniformly give the impression of cynicism and rejection."

These negative attitudes could be the seeds of future challenge to the political process and governmental institutions. Whereas in the 1960s only radical whites, militant blacks and antiwar extremists insisted the system was bad, Watergate has forced everyone to at least contemplate that possibility. Most adults may reason the system still is basically sound because a President was, after all, driven from office. But for the younger generation now

People feel that their government is cheating them.

Why should people have confidence in the government when they punish us, the people, for not paying taxes and they get away with it?

President Nixon cannot be telling the truth about things because he is always contradicting himself.

Overthrown government, Scandles, impeachments is all like a fairy tall. It will live happily ever after.

coming along, the scars may be more enduring.

"My generation believed the system was okay except for a few people in it who were bad," commented Arterton last week. "The real cost of Watergate is that children will grow up believing the system itself is corrupt as well as the people who run it."

If this indeed occurs, the ideals which have been shattered at such a tender age may well be resurrected someday as a powerful engine for change in the political order—hopefully, for the better. As a Richmond fifth grader observed: "Either the government must stop its increasing corruption, or the people will revolt and the system will die from its own institutions and the evil doing that they have done to the people."