

ESSAY

By William Safire

WASHINGTON—On the one day that a blessings countdown is permitted, let us begin by shoveling out the thanks.

Shoppers who sizzle at supermarket checkout counters might try to be thankful that whereas over 22 per cent of the family budget went for food in 1950, less than 17 per cent is spent on food today.

Wage-earners who pull their pockets inside out to flap them in fury could be grateful for the rise in the average person's spending money: taking inflation and higher taxes into account, disposable income that was about \$1,600 in 1950 and \$1,900 in 1960, is nearly \$2,900 per person today.

Auto salesmen who are now leaning on their horns might pause at the fact that two-car families have doubled each decade: 7 per cent owned two cars or more in 1950, 15 per cent in 1960, over 30 per cent today.

Babies banging their spoons against their high chairs should give appreciative gurgles to the drop in infant mortality, from 29 per thousand in 1950 to less than 19 per thousand today: Each child born today can expect to live four years longer than his parents.

Young people, not long ago denounced as unduly violent and now denounced as apathetic, have much greater exposure to education. A generation ago, one-half of this age group was graduated from high school; now three out of four are graduated, and colleges—which enrolled only 10 per cent of 18-to-24-year-olds in 1950—open their doors for 23 per cent today.

Poor people, whom God was said to have loved because he made so many, have been declining in numbers. One

in four of us was poverty-stricken a generation ago but only one in eight is today; progress along those lines has been poor lately, but the percentage of substandard housing units has been coming down over the years, from over what F.D.R. called "one third of a nation" to 16 per cent in 1960 to less than 7 per cent in the seventies.

Retired people living on fixed incomes, who have been silently suffering the most from inflation, have—strange to say—reason to be grateful for the recent rise in unemployment. The necessary recession has already begun to slow the rate of inflation; as unemployment climbs over 7 per cent, inflation will drop toward 7 per cent, and the hollering will be horrendous to rev up the inflation again by the very people who now demand "bold leadership" to hold it down.

Stop a moment. To suggest thanks for recession and unemployment, with all the personal hardship that brings individual families, seems out of joint. Why not continue with the neglected litany of genuine progress in economic and human affairs? Why not take full advantage of Thanksgiving Day to rout the huggermuggers and hungermongers?

Because this Thanksgiving sends a shaft of gray through the harvest colors; as a polity, we have struck down a national leader for the first time in our history, and some of us wonder whether to bow our heads in thanks or shake our heads in shame.

The tapes that were played last week at the Watergate trial make incontrovertible the fact that Richard Nixon consistently and deliberately misled the Congress, the Court and his fellow citizens about what else was on those tapes, and why he wanted to keep them private. When the President issued his edited version in the

spring, he assured all of us who wanted to believe, "This tells it all"; it demonstrably did not.

Therefore, we can be thankful that Mr. Nixon is no longer President. A man should not hold the most important job in the world if he believes that holding on to that job is more important than anything else. History might ameliorate even the cover-up of a crime, but it can never excuse putting survival in office ahead of all honor.

And so I must choke out this apology to John Dean: though you deserved all you have received for your blacklists and your bootlicking, and though your motives all along have been tawdry and selfish, when it came to exposing a pattern of deception in high places—you were a better man than I was, Gunga Dean.

Which reminds me: I left the White House to begin these essays about eighteen months ago. On my way out, lugging a satchelful of desk contents, I paused in front of President Nixon's Executive Office Building hideaway and waved good-bye to the pretty receptionist.

Since Secret Service men were guarding the door, I knew the President was there; should I ask to be admitted to say good-bye? I decided to keep walking; Mr. Nixon would probably have interrupted his meeting long enough for a brief handshake to a longtime aide but he hated those awkward moments and so did I.

That, it turns out, was the late afternoon of March 21, 1973. Had I walked in, I would have been in on the second meeting of that fateful day with Mr. Dean; perhaps the President would have said, "While you're here, Bill, listen to this. . . ."

To whatever force propelled me past the President's door and out into the daylight: a fervent prayer of thanksgiving.