

Twelve Months On

By Anthony Lewis

It will be a year on Saturday. The long drama ended in a rush: The last wounded speech to the White House staff, the flight west, then the new President saying, "The Constitution works." We were exhausted, relieved, amazed to be free at last of Richard Nixon.

Looking back, one finds two main themes in the emotions of that moment—pride in American institutions, hope for a revival of the American spirit. A year later, how much of either survives?

The pride ought to be felt still. It was no easy thing to force a President from office because of high crimes and misdemeanors, and in doing so to maintain the constitutional order. Americans did that: prosecutors, judges, legislators, journalists, above all the public. Few countries could have gone through such a process, after earlier traumas of war and assassination, and remained as stable as this one has.

It is just as much a blessing, too, to have Richard Nixon out of the White House. "People have got to know whether their President is a crook. Well I'm not a crook." Did we really have a President who said such things? There may be a certain morbid nostalgia in recalling the nightmare, until we remember the danger of having such a twisted soul in our highest office.

But hope is another matter. Our hope that the denouement of Watergate would release suppressed ideal-

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ism, charging our politics with the old American generosity and optimism, has been largely disappointed.

The Nixon pardon was a first and fundamental reason. It has been said that President Ford spared himself endless worry by acting so quickly, and that is true enough in a shallow political sense. But the pardon did deeper injury. It raised fresh doubt about the country's commitment to law, just reaffirmed at such pain in the Water-

gate struggle. It fed our pervasive cynicism about politicians. And it did damage to Gerald Ford's moral authority that can never wholly be repaired.

The pardon would have been more defensible as an act of grace if it had been accompanied by a similar gesture on that much more important issue of conscience, amnesty for Vietnam deserters and evaders. But Mr. Ford offered them only a grudging charity, hemmed in by legal traps.

The old generosity has failed us on Vietnam in more than one way. Too many Americans reacted with antagonism to the Vietnamese refugees, and still do, though their tragedy was our responsibility. Recently the Internal Revenue Service moved to withdraw charitable status from gifts to Bach Mai Hospital in Hanoi, which U.S. bombs destroyed—an act of petty official meanness at the Nixon level.

The event of the last year that threw the most doubt on our recovery from the Nixon mentality was the Mayaguez episode. For there were the Nixon trademarks again: the concern for image, the flouting of law, the preference for bombs over diplomacy. It was especially depressing because there was such unthinking, jingoistic approval in Congress and the country—at least at first, before reflection.

After all, what was worrying about Richard Nixon was not the existence of such a person. It was the fact that we elected him President, knowing what he was. The fault was in ourselves.

Of course Nixonism is not unique to us. When Indira Gandhi declared her emergency in India, she said: "It is not important whether I remain Prime Minister or not. However, the institution of the Prime Minister is important and the deliberate political attempt to denigrate it is not in the interest of democracy." Richard Nixon lives, among other places in New Delhi.

But Americans, or at least those of us of a certain age, have always had higher expectations for our society. We believed the July fourth speeches. We meant it when we spoke of America as the last best hope of mankind. We thought of our great power as beneficent.

That is what was so shattering about about the Nixon years: the discovery that we, too, were flawed. The sins cannot all be laid on the head of that dark figure in San Clemente, nauseated though we may be to read of him wearing clothes with a Presidential seal, telephoning Mr. Ford and planning triumphal trips abroad. His wrongs broke the bounds of the Constitution, but the misuse of power began before him.

In the year since he took the oath, Gerald Ford has succeeded in removing the cloud of criminality from the White House. What he has not done is restore faith that the immense power of the American Government will be used, at home or abroad, for freedom and justice and humanity. The hard question is whether we still dare to hope for the reality of those American ideals.