

On Resignation

By Tom Wicker

Charles Morgan Jr. moved out of his office at the Washington headquarters of the American Civil Liberties Union last week, and it's hard to know whether the rest of us are better or worse off as a result. The A.C.L.U.'s Washington director since 1972, and its Southern regional director for eight years before that, Mr. Morgan became one of the few public figures of the time to resign an advantageous and useful position on a matter of principle.

The public is the poorer for having lost a fearless, tireless, voluble and exceptionally able defender of the Bill of Rights and common human decency. But I've just finished reading "The Final Days," the moving and terrible story of Richard Nixon's Götterdämmerung, by Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, and I'm haunted by the thought of how badly the nation needed, in 1973 and 1974, men to stand up and say, "I'm through. I can't take any more deception. I quit." The issue then was different than it was for Chuck Morgan, but the question was the same—how much does a person owe to "the team" and how much to him or herself?

Mr. Morgan's case is instructive. He's a man who can talk the ears off a brass billy goat, as people say down where he comes from, and much of the talking he's done over the years has made a lot of difference in this country. Maybe even the talking he did that got him run out of Birmingham in the early 1960's made some difference in the long run. He said the whole community bore some responsibility for the deaths of five little black girls in a church bombing, and it's possible to believe that a lot of people in Birmingham might agree with that now.

Mr. Morgan was already working, then, on *Reynolds v. Sims*, the suit he filed that led to the Supreme Court's one-man, one-vote decision. Later, he defended Muhammed Ali, Julian Bond, Dr. Howard Levy; and under his direction the A.C.L.U. organized in all 11 states of the Confederacy and became a real force for Southern justice. When he moved to Washington, he also moved into the Watergate case representing wiretap victims, and became the first person to assure me not only that Richard Nixon should be impeached, but would be. And he was, due in part to the relentless advocacy of Chuck Morgan and other Bill of Rights buffs, due more to the fundamental good sense of the American people, in which Mr. Morgan places much faith.

Twice before, he had been in some difficulty within the A.C.L.U.—once for testifying as a private citizen before a Congressional committee, another time for his advocacy of impeachment. This time, he was challenged for speaking out against what he thought was Eastern liberal intolerance of Jimmy Carter's Southern background (although Mr. Morgan was at that time personally supporting Fred Harris for President).

To a rebuke from Aryeh Neier, executive director of the A.C.L.U., he replied: "I was asked to surrender no rights, First Amendment or otherwise, when the A.C.L.U. asked that I come to work for it." When Mr. Neier persisted, Mr. Morgan—in an uncharacteristic burst of brevity—resigned in two sentences.

A few good loud resignations might well have speeded the long agony depicted in "The Final Days." No part of that book has been refuted in any significant way, although questions of interpretation and technique have

IN THE NATION

been legitimately raised; and it supplements the official record in making clear that many Nixon Administration officials knew, or had good reason to believe, that Mr. Nixon, after the spring of 1973, was lying not only to the country but directly to trusted associates and members of his family; or that, at the least, he was not telling them all that he knew, and was therefore allowing others to misstate and distort the record without knowing they were doing so. Once, to J. Fred Buzhardt, Mr. Nixon even suggested the fabrication of evidence.

Yet, men who fundamentally doubted Mr. Nixon's integrity, or knew him to be lying on certain matters, kept silent. Some of these stayed with him out of high personal loyalty, and willingly risked going down with his ship; others tried to protect themselves and their positions; still others looked the other way and would not let themselves see the obvious.

Why was that, particularly in the cases of men whose motives were high? "It is not after confrontation and debate that most Americans are deprived of their liberty," Charles Morgan wrote to members of the A.C.L.U.'s executive committee last week. "That usually arises from day-to-day decisions made within private corporate bureaucracies." Or any other organization, he might have said, where for whatever reasons the individual sacrifices his own integrity for the supposed good of the whole.