

May 4, 1972

the psychology of the Watergate Affair

RIGIDITY + PARANOIA ~~== CORRUPTION~~ $\times N^n =$ Misfeasance

More than he knows, President Nixon is responsible for the Watergate Affair. Not as he explained "responsibility" on television, but in a more fundamental sense. In the character of those whom he appointed as his aides, he repeatedly appointed himself -- himself as he used to be and unconsciously as he would still like to be. The "New Nixon" appointed many "Old Nixons". Thereupon, in a legal sense, they may have done him wrong. But, in psychological terms, he has done to himself what he would really like to have done to others. So he has been hoisted with his own petard.

Watergate began as a fantasy of enfants terribles. Behind the shenanigans of a score of Nixon men was a basic dynamic of American political history. In the immense flux of popular attitudes there is a persistent tendency for rigid beliefs to confront free beliefs, for exclusive characters to oppose inclusive ones, for the suspicious to accuse the benevolent, for cloak-and-dagger types to oppose free-and-open types. The American political process accommodates them. Rarely do they precipitate out. The Watergate cabal was such a precipitate, an unfortunately pure extract of Nixonism.

Rigid, exclusive, paranoid, and authoritarian characters are quite common in politics, not only in America but elsewhere. Normally they mix in the body of ordinary people. They lend attitudes, votes, and a following to selected politicians. Some of them become leaders, usually appointive, but occasionally elective. One of the principal needs of a democratic republic is to spot them, to limit them, and, when they get too close to the heights of power, to get rid of them. The Watergate Affair has shed light upon the problem.

Let us first consider the character of Richard Nixon, which has been charted over many years, with some success. *He appears self-confident (but he will not look at himself on television) and to little avail.* He is a man who faces matters with rigid predispositions. (He remarked, for instance, that he wouldn't have a man with a beard around him.) He possesses a hard layer of opportunism that permits him a well-calculated behavior generally. *(He made spectacular visits to China and Russia.)* He has endured a long career in politics that should have taught him how to stay out of trouble. *(Yet he continues to get into trouble.)* He speaks *in the most sanctimonious terms of any President in history's* *recall* *his television appearance of April 30. (But* ~~On the other hand,~~ he fostered red-baiting in his early campaigns in California. He did not oppose McCarthyism. His friends have often been free-booters, with bizarre notions of American history and with spotty political records. He adopts an adversary posture frequently and excessively.

Nonetheless, President Eisenhower placed his faith in him. He gained a large experience in domestic and foreign politics. His astute tactics of evasion, dissemblance, and counterattack have sometimes been properly employed. His ability to act

decisively in a number of areas is commendable, even though it is fairly well restricted to everyday, conventional problems. All of this was enough to make many sceptical and questioning people support him on occasion, and to garner a large electoral following.

~~Yet early in his first administration, there were~~

~~indications that his basic personality,~~ ^{But} "the Real Nixon," seems inevitably to have worked ~~was working~~ its ways through the operations of the presidency.

The abrupt and calloused military forays he ordered were one. His unnecessary, sharp intrusions on the constitutional prerogatives of Congress were another. He blasted the reports of distinguished commissions that tried to formulate public policy in the sensitive areas of obscenity and drugs, practically impugning their morality.

Most significant of all were his appointments. In the American system, the sum of the powers of presidential appointees easily exceeds the power of the President himself. President Nixon's appointments were treated as individual matters, as is our custom, rather than studied as a whole. In consequence, a succession of similar characters goose-stepped into the key executive offices. ^{And these replicated themselves through their appointees.} Nixon made a large number of high-level appointments in the White House, Cabinet, courts, and agencies who, if they were graded on a scale of rigidity of character, would exceed, on the average, similar scores that might be computed for the members of any presidential administration in history. [¶] They have been a suspicious group, too, on the whole, reiterating the

suspicious side of Nixon himself. And they had to be persons who would not threaten his ego or his power, whether by independence of character, by possession of their own power bases, by social background, or simply instinctively. On the other hand, inexperience and brashness were no bar to high office.

What went on happening for years has brought its results now. When a number of such types come together, they provide mutual reinforcement. Individual psychology becomes group psychology. The makings of a cabal are present.

Ask any sample of experienced politicians and political experts and they will express almost unanimous astonishment about the motives that led the Watergate conspirators to take their considerable risks and their associates to become silent accomplices. Quite apart from the moral question, to take any risk to discover what an opposing party headquarters is up to is an absurdity bordering upon insanity. Little of importance is to be recorded, and that little is likely to be reversed the next day.

Further, should one ask what kind of madness it is, the answer would be fairly obvious. It is a syndrome of beliefs: that momentous, terrible, and mysterious things happen in politics; that you cannot trust anybody; that the opposition is wicked and conspiratorial; that if you don't watch out, they will get you before you get them; and whatever the odds against the "enemy's" success (think how pathetic the situation of the Democrats ^{had become} ~~you~~), you must crush them by all means.

The Watergate psychopathology ~~psychiatrists~~ induces people who are essentially amoral to become strident advocates of utmost morality. Phrases that ordinary people use with ordinary meanings acquire sinister meanings: "Peace with honor;" "law and order;" etc. What is happening psychologically is that the compartments of the rigid mind are too segregated to permit the free circulation of normal moral logic. Feelings of guilt that come from low estimates of themselves are suppressed, but then, seeking outlet, are projected onto others as a kind of superman supermorality. The free and easy American political scene is transformed into a threatening den of iniquity, into which they must sneak with cloak and dagger.

One must not overlook either the contempt of politics as usual and the incapacity for the hard everyday business of government that are ~~hard~~ typical of such minds. Especially because they care little for and are 

^{are} and indisposed toward the actually grave problems of the world, the humdrum of a conventionally focused and mediocre administration does not suffice to appease their fuming anxieties. They cannot be anything but conventional in their approach toward great problems. They cannot create exciting and beautiful new worlds, no more than can their master. So they must exercise themselves in infantile but quite destructive fantasies.

President Nixon, an old hand at politics, may have learned to control his own ^{everyday} character. However, it is one thing to control oneself, and another to possess this same control in making appointments. Appointments are a mirror of oneself, and often a better mirror than the self. One's satisfactions emerge consciously and unconsciously from the appearance and behavior of those whom he has created. Nixon's staff is his own uncontrolled deep self.

He has never advanced to the level of self-knowledge where he would understand this. He could not ward off in his creatures those vices that he had difficulty enough controlling in himself. His speech of the last of April, accepting "responsibility," was actually an Orwellian "Newspeak" of non-responsibility. It indicates that he is apparently still locked inside his own person; his past successes, brought about by his clockwork opportunism, have only helped to interdict the small potential that he has for change. He cannot call for the right sort of help because he is too rigid to realize that he cannot; if he realized that he cannot, then he could

call for help. He is Mr. Catch 22.

The impact of a single personality spreads to a group -- the appointments and the subsequent cabal we have spoken of. But the pathology of Watergate is infectious on a broader reach of public and official behavior. We note that in the latest Gallup poll on the Watergate affairs, that not only do as many as half the people believe the President to have been dissembling, and a third that he should be impeached, but that over half believe past administrations to have been as bad.

America needs least of all in these times a further deterioration of public trust and an escalation of social hostilities. Now we must face the possibility of these occurring. When the presidency is shaken, many people lose some faith in their own perceptions and outlook. They bear a heavy load of insecurities ~~and~~ ^{part of which become politicized.} already. The insecurity now focused on the top level of government raises up old fears; old fears stimulate buried resentments; resentments breed accusations; accusations provoke strife. The infection continues to spread.

The halting of the process is difficult. It can only come ~~through~~ ^{through} a substitute leadership. Two things have to be accomplished simultaneously: a firm legal suppression of malfeasance and a reassurance of the nation as to its constructive destiny. Leaders of the Independent Sector -- business, labor, foundations, press -- and leaders of Congress must set national goals, Messages on the State of the Nation, of a new kind. These can ~~counter~~ ^{relieve} the empty feeling that is obviously occurring and will perhaps grow, that ^{if the presidency is unsettled,} no one is thinking of the public good and it's everyman for himself."

10.8

~~insert page 11~~

Thanks to its social constitution -- the independence of powers given its courts, its republican Congress, its free press, and its competing parties -- America is gifted with an interminable and tireless vigilance. The facts do emerge. Fortunately. Because, as the philosopher Immanuel Kant declared, theories without facts are empty, just as facts without theories are blind. Given the facts about Watergate, we shall still have far to go. But go we must, toward the deliberate improvement of our systems of civic education and the recruitment of mature, responsible, and benevolent leadership.

----- end -----