

EXCURSUS I

The Post-Watergate Morality, at Five Minutes Before Midnight

The events of 1974 proved convincingly that, contrary to what many had thought, American democracy was in good health. The year that has begun may well show whether American democracy is capable of remaining alive.

At one point in the unfolding Watergate drama Richard Nixon remarked that one day people would ask what it was all about. Despite all the confusion of what sometimes looked like an Ionesco script acted out by the Marx Brothers—spies chasing psychiatrists, lawyers picking up fees in phone booths, well-groomed businessmen lugging around suitcases stuffed with money, and a head of state immortalizing obscenities on poorly functioning tape recorders—despite all this it is finally quite simple to state what it was all about: The Nixon Administration tried to interfere with the American political system in the best traditions of, say, Nicaragua; the system resisted and defeated the attempt; and in the course of doing so the system demonstrated that some of its crucial components—notably the free press, the courts, and the legislative branch of government—functioned pretty much the way the civics textbooks say they should function. This was cause for celebration by everyone with a stake in American democracy, not just for the liberals, who may justly claim credit for this particular vindication of the system. Nor was the luster of the democratic victory affected too badly by the spirit of petty vindictiveness evinced by some of the architects of this victory; after all, no one is perfect.

And so we are now supposed to have entered the era of the post-Watergate political morality. Some of the early manifestations of this have been less than inspiring (such as the endless investigation of Nelson Rockefeller by the House Judiciary Committee), but if this new morality means a greater vigilance in the protection of our liberties and a lessened tolerance of elected officials ripping off the public, then that too is a cause for celebration. In that case, the post-Watergate morality may be added to a number of other moral achievements which, again contrary to fashionable views, American democracy has shown itself capable of in the last decade—notably, an historically unparalleled public concern for the rights of weak and underprivileged groups in society, and, at the least, an historically

rare case of a politically effective opposition to an unjust war. Perhaps the greatest achievement has been that the civil liberties of Americans have emerged strengthened rather than diminished after this period of intense social and political tensions.

There is a grim irony in the timing of these events in terms of international developments. The irony may turn out to be grimly Hegelian, another case of the owl of Minerva flying at dusk. The Western world, and with it the United States, has very probably entered the most severe time of testing since the 1930's. With frightening rapidity the plausible scenarios for the West seem to be narrowing down to economic catastrophe on the one hand and perilous military adventure on the other. Once more the lights are about to go out all over Europe, both literally and metaphorically, while mass starvation is fast becoming a near-certainty over vast areas of the Third World. The most optimistic prognoses all seem to count on the good sense of either the oil potentates or the Kremlin rulers, or (most optimistically) both of these. A measure of the irony came home to me just when the House Judiciary Committee was concluding its resentful probe into the Rockefeller fortune. It was just then that the British journal *The Economist* published its calculation that, at the current surplus of petrodollars, it would take the OPEC countries *six days* to buy the wealth of the entire Rockefeller family. (It would, incidentally, take them 143 days to buy IBM, 1.8 years to buy all direct American investments outside the United States, and 9.2 years to buy the New York Stock Exchange.)

As I am writing this, the most recent post-Watergate moral outrage has been triggered by the revelations about domestic spying by the CIA. To avoid misunderstanding, let me say quickly that I don't believe in domestic spying by the CIA, indeed that I'm no admirer of this particular organization, and that I'm basically in favor of enterprising journalists looking for dirt under government rugs. Yet not even the *New York Times* has suggested that this country should forego the gathering of intelligence about American citizens who may be plotting the overthrow of the government, in which case the issue would appear to be a jurisdictional dispute between the CIA and the FBI. I'm all in favor of resolving the dispute in favor of the FBI (over which there are stronger judicial and political restraints), but I'm not persuaded that the issue merits this new explosion of outrage, at least in view of what is known so far.

But there is a much more serious side to all this, which also came home to me as a result of



the unfortunate habit of reading too much. On one single day, in the *Times*, there was a letter from an alleged expert on the CIA questioning whether the latter's charter even permitted covert operations in *foreign* countries and a report to the effect that a federal antidiscrimination agency has directed the police department in Houston, Texas, to stop screening applicants for previous criminal records. Extreme and therefore irrelevant cases? Perhaps. Or, alternatively, such cases may be seen as symptoms of a strange and ultimately suicidal state of mind. *What our new political morality may finally come to is the self-disarmament of the society, both at home and abroad, in the face of forces that have only derision for the sensitivities of the liberal conscience.*

This is not to preach a political gospel according to Gordon Liddy. Nor is it to gloss over the perennial ambiguities between ethics and power, liberty and strength, the rights of the individual and the collective right to self-defense. But different times call for different emphases. American society stands today on the brink of potentially devastating economic, social, and political pressures. It faces depression at home, unprecedented isolation and defeat on the international scene, and quite possibly war. American society, in other words, finds itself within sight of a state of siege. It has long been one of the glories of the democratic experiment that it has sought to pass through such times without sacrificing the essentials of liberty. But neither can such times sustain utopian projects that under-

mine the basic means of self-defense. The attainment of every single item on the liberal agenda requires a society that is strong both domestically and internationally. Like it or not, it requires both the FBI and the CIA, as it requires a formidable military establishment. To be sure, this does not imply our emulating the Nicaraguan model. But neither does it allow us the luxury of institutionalizing the political mores of the smaller Swiss cantons. If we go any further on the latter path we shall perish. With us would perish, for a long time, the fondest liberal hopes for both freedom and justice.

PLB

EXCURSUS II

Environmental War

The hurricanes which devastated Honduras and the floods which all but destroyed Bangladesh during the past year served as grim reminders of the arbitrary power of weather. Harnessing weather as a means of warfare would at one time have seemed unthinkable, a grotesque variation on chemical and biological warfare. But "weather war" has already been fought, and if current diplomatic and congressional efforts fail, weather may become a sophisticated weapon in future arsenals.

In January, 1974, former Defense Secretary Melvin Laird admitted that, despite past denials, the United States had in fact modified the weather in Vietnam during its active involvement in the war there. Between 1967 and 1972, \$21.6 million was spent in cloud-seeding to cause rain, floods, and landslides to block off the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The Pentagon estimated that in some instances rainfall was 30 per cent above average.

Representative Gilbert Gude (R.-Md.), co-sponsor with Representative Donald Fraser (D.-Minn.) of a House resolution calling for a prohibition of weather modification as a means of warfare (a similar resolution passed the Senate in 1973), has noted that the U.S. is the world leader in weather modification research and, as such, should take the lead "in proposing a treaty to outlaw military application of this research." America, however, does not seem to be taking that lead. Noting the problems which arise when a nation practices weather war, Gude indicated that it was because of the Vietnam rainmaking that the U.S. weakened a statement on climate modification at the 1972 United Nations Stock-