

Connections

Varieties of Resignation

There is in the wind today a good deal of heady talk about resigning. Most of it, admittedly, does not emanate from those who are themselves considering resigning. The talk is lodged mostly in advice generously tendered to the man who holds the highest political office in the country, and in speculation about the possibility that he will act upon that advice.

Still, we have been exposed to some startling resignations recently. It is not often that one can expect to see a Vice President of the United States persuaded, however reluctantly, to retire from a position which imposes no onerous tasks, provides relatively high status and holds out tantalizingly the possibility of further advancement. The other recent resignations from high office were of a different order. Elliot L. Richardson, on giving up his office of Attorney General, made one of the most balanced, judicial and prudent assessments of the situation which determined his action. No condemnations, no harsh words or harsh judgments, simply the decisive act itself: "Although I strongly believe in the general purposes and priorities of this Administration I . . . have been compelled to conclude that I could better serve my country by resigning my public office than by continuing in it."

The resignation of the Deputy Attorney General followed soon upon Richardson's. "There has to be," said William Ruckelshaus, "a line over which any public official refuses to step." And he did not step.

In spite of the startling, even sensational, nature of these acts, one cannot say that resignations in Washington have reached epidemic proportions. There, as elsewhere, most people seem to have a natural immunity or to have been inoculated against the dread virus. Yet these publicized resignations, and others that received little or no attention, make of the present political period one which contrasts sharply with the recent past. In all the long years of the Vietnam war were there no political leaders who disagreed sharply with the policies of their superiors, with the policies of the country, leaders whose resignations, if submitted on principle and publicized as such, would have had a salutary effect upon those policies and upon the country? Were there no such leaders? Or did they fail to perceive that line over which Richardson and Ruckelshaus refused to step?

Let us admit that such lines are not always readily

discernible, that there is frequently an alternative to noisy or not-so-noisy exit. If one does not loyally support the policies of one's political superior or the policies of the system within which one works, one can become part of the loyal opposition, one can try to create a degree of static that will interrupt the steady self-confirming hum generated by a dynamic system. This will be to defy the axiom given almost classic formulation by Sam Rayburn when he was Speaker of the House: "To get along, you must go along." To undertake seriously the task of being an in-house gadfly one must resign oneself to the possibility of seeming obnoxious and of being, with greater or lesser ceremony, booted out. If one does not go along, one often will not get along—within the system.

Nevertheless, there are possibilities of fighting within the system, and it is this possibility that was, I presume, in the mind of one of our readers when he sent in, without comment, this quotation from Shakespeare's *King John* (Act IV, ii):

King John

Hadst thou but shook thy head or made a pause
When I spake darkly what I purposed,
Or turn'd eyes of doubt upon my face,
As bid me tell my tale in express words,
Deep shame had struck me dumb, made me break
off,

And those thy fears might have wrought fears in
me:

But thou didst understand me by my signs
And didst in signs again parley with sin;
Yes, without stop, didst let thy heart consent,
And consequently thy rude hand to act
The deed, which both our tongues held vile to
name.

Out of my sight, and never see me more!
My nobles leave me; and my state is braved,
Even at my gates, with ranks of foreign powers:
Nay, in the body of this fleshly land,
This kingdom, this confine of blood and breath,
Hostility and civil tumult reigns

Loyalty, loyal opposition or exit? I have been speaking of these options primarily as they exist within the higher reaches of government. They exist, however, wherever there is an

institution of which one feels a part, and the problem of choosing and acting becomes greater the more powerful the institutional pull, the more links to the bureaucratic chain that both ties one to and separates one from others in the system. The system can be the government of the United States, General Motors, the Catholic Church, the Army, the university. *Mutatis mutandis*, the essential problems are the same. And one of those problems, perhaps the crucial problem, is how one decides when his conscience brings him into conflict with one of the major institutions of which he is a member and when he has freedom to act.

This is the problem which, in the context of the U.S. Army, Josiah Bunting examines in this issue of *Worldview*. Aside from the modesty and sophistication with which Mr. Bunting discusses his own resignation from the officer corps of the Army, his article has a further merit. Although his resignation was not from a position as high as those of Messrs. Ruckelshaus, Richardson, Agnew, and received, therefore, limited publicity, it did not go unnoticed. And it has led others to examine the merits of institutions to which they belong and to assess the effectiveness of their membership.

In his article Mr. Bunting makes clear that in resigning as he did he had no intention or expectation of charting a course for others. What came to seem appropriate—even necessary—for him might not be appropriate for another person. He says, for example: "I am not comfortable striving with political men." And we know that for some men the conflict, strife and competition of politics is the sustaining element of their lives, the very breath they breathe. Given a common reading of the situation within which they must operate, different men might well reach different conclusions about the necessity or the value of resigning—unless, of course, they perceive that line of which Mr. Ruckelshaus spoke. In which case they are faced with the choice of an honorable or a dishonorable decision.

Just as there are various ways of coping with a system—loyalty, loyal opposition or exit—so there are varieties of resignation. One can formally resign because one is, in fact, forced out; one can resign from an institution because one is disillusioned with it and with the possibility of improving it from within; and one can resign, as did Elliot Richardson, because of loyalty to the institution, an institution likely to be weakened if one stays, strengthened if one leaves. Such a resignation demands much from the individual. When the institution to be strengthened and preserved is that of the government itself, such a resignation is properly regarded as an act of personal integrity and of high patriotism.

James Finn

No Promises, but . . .

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