

Judging the American People

Watergate and the people of America. An uncertain relation. And the uncertainty does not hinge only on the unresolved problems of Watergate. It turns as well on the reaction of the American people. And, surprisingly, that reaction remains unpredictable. After being interviewed, probed, weighed, profiled, analyzed, codified, tabulated and filed, the American people are still capable of surprising both distinterested and partisan observers.

Three highly interested observers commented recently on some aspects of the American people and Watergate: Senator James Buckley, Vice President Gerald Ford and Mr. H.R. Haldeman. Senator Buckley's well-expressed statement got most attention because he called upon President Nixon, in the interests of the nation and of the Presidency, to resign. "The stage has now been reached," he said "at which Americans must come to terms with Watergate if Watergate is not to end up drowning all of us." Senator Buckley favors resignation rather than possible impeachment and conviction for two reasons. First, the present crisis of the regime, which involves "the unparalleled downfall of virtually the entire staff of the head of Government," focuses on the President. It couldn't be otherwise because "the character of a regime always reflects and expresses the character of the leader."

So much for why the President can no longer govern effectively. Familiar sentiments by now, although they come with unusual force from a stalwart conservative such as Senator Buckley. Consistent with these views but less familiar was the second reason the Senator favored resignation: Impeachment proceedings would be too messy, too drawn out, too—well, the Senator provided the scenario.

For three months or more the Senate chamber would be transformed into a stage set for the greatest melodrama ever conceived. History would come to a stop for the duration—in the country and throughout the world. The ruler of the mightiest nation on earth would be starred as the prisoner in the dock. The chamber would become a 20th century Roman Coliseum as the performers are thrown to the electronic lions.

The most sordid dregs dug up by the Watergate miners would inflame the passions of the domestic audience and provoke the guffaws, prurient curiosity, the amazement of the outside world. The audience would hear those magical tapes in full—that could not be avoided. Not only the words directly relevant to charges at issue, but all the surrounding talk and epithets of tough, earthy men speaking as such men do in their supposedly private dialogue.

Now it is true that impeachment proceedings in the

electronic age would be unique, that they would draw unparalleled attention (although there would probably still be some people who would prefer to watch "I Love Lucy" or the ball game) and that the nation would not pass through the ordeal unscathed. But what the Senator is suggesting is that the people—that beast—would, their passions inflamed, rampage through the political jungle. That view should be sharply contested. The American people are not total political innocents. They do not think politicians are always delicate, genteel and exquisitely courteous or that the political decisions are the result only of soft, rational persuasion.

But no more than their political leaders did they rush toward impeachment either during the Watergate hearings or after. There is sound reason to believe the American people could evaluate the disclosures that impeachment proceedings would entail. As for the electronic fear that shot through the Senator, one could well argue that electronics allow a greater degree of democratic participation. And that is one of the things the Senator does not like about the possibility of open, televised impeachment proceedings. Too democratic.

On the other hand, there is Vice President Ford. He would give the American people greater responsibility. "The great political lesson of Watergate," he said, "is this. Never again must America allow an arrogant, élite guard of political adolescents like CREEP to bypass the regular party organization and dictate the terms of national election." Not a kind way to talk about John Mitchell, John Erlichman, H.R. Haldeman, et al. But it does pass an absolving hand over G.O.P. regulars and place on Americans generally the responsibility for allowing those arrogant adolescents in the White House to cut up the way they did.

Speaking to the Young Presidents' Organization recently, one of that "arrogant, élite guard" also referred to Watergate and the American people. In his own opinion, Mr. Haldeman said, and in President Nixon's opinion as well, an awful lot of information and knowledge is being made public that, in the interests of the nation, should not be. That is, given the disclosures of the last year, a debatable opinion. But again the reason is of first importance. "The American people," Mr. Haldeman said, "do not have the means by which to determine the entire truth in ample or adequate perspective." The means to which he refers are, we are beckoned to assume, to remain forever elusive. Elusive to the American people, of course, not to an élite group.

There are, obviously, reasons for privacy, closeted diplomacy and secrecy in governmental affairs. Those reasons, soundly based, do not lead inevitably to the distrust of the American people that is evident in Mr. Haldeman's statement. Watergate represents one of those crises in a democracy for which the cure is more democracy. If impeachment proceedings there are to be, let them be public.

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