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Lessons of Watergate

Roger C. Cramton

When a "rather equivocal and shapeless pudding" was placed before Winston Churchill, it caused him to command, "Pray, take away this pudding, it has no theme." The Watergate pudding, tasteless as it may be, must have lessons for our time. But what is its theme?

One lesson involves the relationship between money and politics. There is nothing new about this problem except the magnitude and brazenness of recent abuses. But the role of government as dispenser of privileges in the form of grants, contracts, licenses, tax exemptions, and the like is now so large that ties to the financing of political campaigns can no longer be tolerated as they were in the past. The danger here is to avoid overreactive legislation that would favor incumbents and stifle new movements or candidates.

A second lesson concerns the misuse of "national security" that can occur when exaggerated deference is given to executive claims of secrecy. "Patriotism," Dr. Johnson said long ago, "is the last refuge of the scoundrel"; in our time governmental bureaucrats have invoked the magic words "national security" in order to conceal misdeeds or provide a cover for irresponsible actions—such as the raid on the files of Mr. Ellsberg's psychiatrist. Here again, one hopes that the tide will not move so far that the legitimate claims of national security in the conduct of government will be ignored.

A third lesson of Watergate is cause for great reassurance—Watergate does not suggest that basic institutional reform of our constitutional system is required. Indeed, recent events have demonstrated the durability and soundness of our constitutional system in adapting to novel and difficult circumstances. The sweeping changes that have been proposed, such as a six-year presidential term or a change to the parliamentary system, would not have prevented or cured the Watergate problem; and they seem to me to be wholly unwise and unnecessary.

Nor should we fret about an immediate repetition of Watergate. The sanctions it has imposed on politicians are so great that a repetition is unlikely for many years. The dan-

gers society may need to guard against least are those that have been most recently surmounted.

A fourth lesson of Watergate concerns the excessive glorification of the presidency, which opens the door to presidential abuse of power. Was Richard Nixon alone in his profound misunderstanding of the uses of presidential power? Or is there something about the glorified isolation of the Oval Office that leads to delusions of grandeur on the part of any incumbent?

The expansion in the power and prestige of the president has been a steady development of recent generations, based in part on social needs for executive leadership and in part on public glorification of the president as father figure, movie idol, and monarch. It is worth remembering that Thomas Jefferson, after returning on foot from his inauguration, waited his turn at his boarding house until one of the other guests had finished his meal.

The founding fathers hoped to do away with the trappings of sovereignty; there was to be no king, no titles, no princes or courtiers. The president was to serve an executive function in carrying out the government's business, for which he was accountable to the people, but he was not intended to be a king.

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But the kingly role apparently satisfies primitive needs that are hard to displace. Michael Novak has argued that we need someone to personify the people, to be the mythic and unifying link in the nation's history. "Our presidents loom larger than any other figures in the national imagination." And, occasionally, as with Richard Nixon, presidents use the kingly role as a cover for executive activities for which they do not wish to be accountable to the people.

We would be better off as a free people if we placed less symbolic freight and less absolute power in the president,

acting alone. An affirmative consequence of Watergate is the general recognition that the balance in our constitutional system had become overweighted on the executive side and that other institutions—the legislature, the courts, and a free press—have an important role in governance and in the maintenance of liberty.

Yet the events of the past month demonstrate, I fear, that we have learned less than we should have from the Watergate affair. The excessive preoccupation with the kingly role of the presidency continues almost as before. Instead of viewing President Ford as the quite ordinary, unpretentious, working politician he is, the press devoted itself to glorifying the mythical super-president in an avalanche of publicity about dancing parties, poolside picnics, and breakfast muffins. Having created a mythic super-hero, the press then reacted with violent anger when Ford suddenly took an action with which most of them disagreed—the pardon of former President Nixon.

A more down-to-earth view of government and the presidency would not have magnified the euphoria nor been so crushed by a single action. As David Broder says, "We are congenitally incapable of getting it in our heads that the president is just another politician who ought to be viewed with tolerant skepticism as a human being, and be judged over some reasonable length of time on the basis of the inevitable successes and failures of public policy for which he can be held to account."

A fifth lesson of Watergate is a warning signal for the future. Trust and confidence in our public institutions and public figures have ebbed away remorselessly under the hammer blows of credibility gaps, official deceit, and downright criminality in the White House. The spreading cynicism regarding politicians and political institutions saps constructive energies and is producing corrosive apathy that, if it continues to grow, may undermine our freedoms more thoroughly than any foreign enemy.

The note of semi-hysteria that has surrounded much of the discussion of President Ford's pardon of Mr. Nixon provides a useful example. The pardon is over and done with, and nothing can ever be done about it. Although the wisdom of the president's action is debatable, and the surprise and secrecy of its accomplishment imprudent, President Ford was clearly within his powers and he was acting on the basis of what he believed to be good reasons and motives. And he is accountable for his action—the people will

have an opportunity to pass judgment at the polls on this and other actions which Ford takes over the next two years.

Yet President Ford's action has been attacked in the most violent terms as a "continuation of the cover-up" and as dishonest and corrupt. It will be unfortunate if Richard

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Nixon's legacy to American politics is a corrosive distrust and widespread paranoia that views every public act as the product of deceit, corruption, or malevolence. There is as much decency and good will along the Potomac as elsewhere in America, and simple goof-up or poor judgment are more likely explanations of a wrong or silly decision than is public corruption. It is Mutt and Jeff rather than Iago that are more often the proper analogy for governmental actions which we cannot understand.

If we eye each other as enemies and liars, and view our leaders as cut from the same cloth, the political community will dissolve into warfare. "Respect for diversity," Michael Novak has said, "is the highest form of politics. When politics declines, moralism rises: enemies are no longer partners in negotiation but objects of retribution. When the effort to respect diversity is more habitual to many in America, it will be easier for our presidents to manifest it, too. We cannot expect presidents to do what we do not do ourselves."

Thus the final and ultimate lesson of Watergate is that in a democracy the people get the kind of government they deserve. The faults we see in public life are all too often the reflection of our own moral failures. A long time ago Walt Whitman put it this way:

O I see flashing that this America is only you and me,
Its power, weapons, testimony, are you and me,
Its crimes, lies, thefts, defections, and you and me,
Its Congress is you and me, the officers, capitols, armies,
ships, are you and me.

If honesty, integrity, fidelity and compassion are to regenerate our public life, the effort must start with you and me.