

1974: Crisis of Leadership

To look back over the course of 1974, as one inevitably does at this time of year, is to recognize an astonishing change in the personalities that carry the burden of leadership in the nations of the world. It is difficult to recall a year when so many governments have dramatically fallen, and new faces and voices suddenly appeared to represent their people's interests. A crisis of confidence in government seems to be, as the year draws to a close, not simply a phenomenon of this or that national political scene, but rather a mood spread as widely as the international political order.

When the year began in January, 1974, Japanese Premier Kakuei Tanaka was touring the countries of Southeast Asia. By the year's end, Mr. Tanaka had resigned in an atmosphere of political crisis and personal scandal. In Great Britain, Prime Minister Edward Heath was struggling with the coal strike that would eventually cause the collapse of his government. Death after a lingering illness claimed French President Georges Pompidou in May and the legendary leader of Argentina, Juan Perón, in July. Their successors struggle, unsuccessfully thus far, with dangerous social unrest. Israel's Prime Minister Golda Meir and West Germany's Willy Brandt were two national leaders who retired voluntarily during the year and, in doing so, retained their personal dignity. The heads of the governments of Greece, Portugal, Ethiopia and Cyprus were routed from office a good deal more violently.

The most dramatic change of leadership, of course, took place here in the United States. The story of Watergate progressed with tragic inevitability. As the year began, Richard M. Nixon was insisting that he would fight to the end. In March, his principal advisers were indicted. Spring brought the release of the Presidential transcripts and a disheartening look at the inner life of the Nixon White House. By June, the great mandate of November, 1972, had turned into a desperate game of impeachment politics as Mr. Nixon courted the necessary votes to avoid a two-thirds conviction in the Senate. In July, television turned its merciless eye on the impeachment hearings of the House Judiciary Committee, and, by and large, a nation in danger of total cynicism was encouraged by what it saw, as the committee members pursued a distasteful task with responsibility and a minimum of politics. A unanimous decision of the Supreme Court concerning that strangest of all evidence, the White House tapes, was the final, decisive turn in

the plot. On August 8, Mr. Nixon announced his resignation.

In the months that have followed the change in Presidents, it has become clear that political reform was not accomplished nor national leadership restored by the simple removal of Mr. Nixon. As the national trauma of Watergate bleeds to a conclusion in Judge John J. Sirica's courtroom, it becomes more and more evident that political corruption is caused by systems and structures as much as by the personal failures of individuals. The financing of political campaigns remains a problem that is unresolved. The influence of corporate wealth on political process, one of the original sources of the Watergate corruption, poses a challenge that the U. S. Congress seems unwilling to face.

In a sense, then, our national experience reflects the dilemma behind the crisis of leadership throughout the world. Systems loom larger than men. Economic forces combine with political passion to create a dynamic too complex to understand and too relentless to control. A vast shift in the world's centers of power is taking place, but the political vision and the political will necessary to direct such change is nowhere evident.

At such a time, when conventional cultural assumptions about the good life are becoming undone, the religious communities confront both a temptation and a challenge. The temptation is to withdraw and seek compensation for an incomprehensible world in the more immediate experiences of prayer and intimacy. To be sure, this kind of personal and religious experience answers a deep human need that is ignored only at great loss. Still, total preoccupation with a private life betrays the experience itself and becomes, in the end, unreal. The challenge, then, is to bring the insight and the courage that arise from this personal center into the public struggle to redeem the systems within which we live. The task here is to participate in this struggle with patience, avoiding the ideological simplicities to which religious men too often succumb.

The tensions involved in both the temptation and the challenge were very much at work in the Roman Synod on evangelization this fall. The very process of the Synod—the interaction of Pope and bishops—brought into focus the moving center of the gospel message: the Kingdom of God is here and it is still to come. The Christian who, as a pilgrim, seeks that Kingdom, does not find his ultimate hope in any human leader, even one more compelling than

those presently available. But neither is he deceived into thinking that what he or others do makes no difference, that oppressive systems cannot be affected by individual action. Systems, like men, are always in need of redemption, and, while the pilgrimage lasts, the work of redemption goes on. The year to come, like the year that has passed, will still be a year of the Lord.

The View From the UN

From Yasser Arafat to William F. Buckley, the United Nations has attracted the attention of more people in 1974 than in many years past. In the process, the organization has displayed as never before its weaknesses and its indispensability. A review of its record in 1974 can provide a useful appraisal of important shifts in international politics over the past year.

A sense of newness began with the Special Session of the General Assembly last April. A new Third World aggressiveness, fueled by Arab oil, was apparent in the tone of Algerian President Houari Boumediene, who noted that "the gradual shift out of the cold war context has not been accompanied by a corresponding improvement in the condition of the countries of the Third World." The old questions were being replaced by new ones. The huge and heterogeneous group called the "Third World" since the 1950's had come to constitute a majority of votes in the Assembly and could be said to represent three of the world's four billion people. Refusing alignment with either of the "superpowers," this group put both the United States and the Soviet Union on the defensive. At the year's end, their coming to power may be considered a major event of 1974.

A similar new direction was taken at the World Population Conference in August. UN planners had begun more and more in recent years to discuss population control as an element of a comprehensive development philosophy, one that involved far more than just birth control. Development became the issue even at the Population Conference, and although all sides claimed some sort of victory, it was clear that the new agenda had had its effect on the conference and on the Population Plan of Action. Three months later, the World Food Conference dramatized the harsh realities of world poverty, recalling Mr. Boumediene's insistence that "the problem of development today has become the priority of priorities we must all face." Expectations that economic questions would dominate the regular fall session had to be revised when the

questions of Palestine and the expulsion of South Africa commanded the most attention; whatever else they might have meant, these issues were also revealing the new majority at work.

Not everyone is delighted by this. U. S. Ambassador to the United Nations John Scali, for example, has on several occasions, beginning at the special session last spring, criticized the "tyranny of the majority" which can lead to the passing of resolutions that will remain unenforced because the nations that have the money and power to enforce them are in opposition. This past month, Mr. Scali expressed his particular displeasure at the tendency of the majority to act highhandedly and even capriciously, thereby endangering the credibility of the UN. Evidence is strong that many Americans share this displeasure, including a large number of Senators who expressed it in writing to President Ford.

The new majority has indeed shown its immaturity, not least in treating Yasser Arafat as a chief of state and in dragging UNESCO into the swamp of Middle East politics by voting to exclude Israel from UNESCO. It is undeniable that, unlike the former U. S. majority bloc, built on real financial and military might and the veto power in the Security Council, the new majority will have only its votes to back up resolutions until petrodollars come to the support of petropolitics. Most disturbing of all, some Third World governments have done precious little to help the people they righteously and sometimes elegantly represent.

Nevertheless, U. S. indignation in the face of the new UN majority has been superficial and dishonest. The style of protocol accorded Mr. Arafat, for example, has been allowed to cloud the fundamental issue behind his appearance in the Assembly; unconvincing moral outrage has often substituted for careful consideration of that invitation and its relation to settlement in the Middle East. The unwise suspension of South Africa, on the other hand, is an expression of frustration at the repeated refusal of the United States and others to cooperate with legitimate efforts to bring justice to southern Africa, a refusal that contradicts the spirit and sometimes the letter of many an Assembly consensus.

Defined only as the world's have-nots, the new majority nations form no monolithic bloc. They number among them the largest democracy in the world as well as several dictatorships and countries as diverse as India, Chad and Venezuela. But this year they have brought into focus the crucial issues—resources, development, food, the Middle East—from the viewpoint of their own aspirations. Neither peace nor justice can be established if their perspective is not understood and recognized.

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