

A White House Homily—Undelivered

The Word of God is something alive and active: it cuts like any double-edged sword but more finely; it can slip through the place where the soul is divided from the spirit, or joints from the marrow; it can judge the secret emotions and thoughts. (Heb. 4:12)

Mr. President, members of the White House family:

The Bible tells us that God's word is a two-edged sword. Sociologists tell us much the same thing when they point out that the role of religion in society is two-fold: to canonize and to criticize, to support society but also to judge it. Some of the most distinguished churchmen in America have, at your invitation, Mr. President, spoken at these White House Sunday services. My words this morning cannot be as reassuring as theirs often were. We would not be faithful to God's word or to you who listen to that word with us, if we did not speak this morning to what a member of the White House family has recently called a "political and constitutional crisis," so clearly also a moral crisis, the crisis of Watergate.

To remind ourselves that there are important moral issues involved in the complicated history that is emerging from the Senate hearings might seem unnecessary. It is all too obvious that blackmail, invasion of privacy, bribery, perjury, defamation of character, all involve moral values. Yet one of the chilling revelations has been the complete absence of moral concern at any stage of the conspiracy. The questions asked were pragmatic; the doubts and hesitations concerned expense or deniability. No one asked: Is this just and good?

It has been suggested that the Watergate conspirators were influenced by the spirit of civil disobedience that characterized the antiwar movement and were led into the activists' error of justifying means by ends. The analogy is misleading. It is not necessary to approve every instance of civil disobedience in the peace movement to recognize the vast difference between public protest and secret subversion. Those who protested against the war appealed to conscience and moral values and accepted the sanctions of the state as a part of their protest. The Watergate conspirators made every effort to conceal their actions and escape the sanctions of the state. And can the goals of the antiwar activists and the conspirators really be compared? An end to bloodshed has been the goal of all Americans, whatever their disagreement on the means to achieve

it. The goal of the Watergate conspiracy—to dictate the result of a free election—is repudiated by all Americans, whatever their political differences.

It is important to be clear on what kind of moral issue was involved. One of the most prominent religious spokesmen in the United States has called Watergate the culmination of a national moral decline, the result of an era of permissiveness. Such a call for penance and discipline is always salutary, but in the present instance it blurs the nature of the evil we confront. The men of Watergate were not playboys of permissiveness but true believers in the work ethic. In the words of one of their colleagues, men of high private morality but lacking in a sense of public morality.

Prestige, money, advancement, the usual idols of the "American dream," were not completely absent from the motivation of the conspirators. Yet for all that, Watergate still represents a new kind of political corruption. American politics has known before men who abused positions of power for private gain. The Watergate conspiracy betrayed the public trust in more deadly fashion. It stole our birthright.

The actual incident of June 17, 1972, as is now abundantly clear, was no isolated adventure. It was part of a deliberate plan to subvert the process of democratic election. When those who broke the law were apprehended, some of the most highly placed men in the government attempted to enlist government institutions in a conspiracy against justice. If all this were simply an excess of campaign zeal, the result would be tragic enough. The apparent mandate the President received in November would be forever stained by the tactics employed in its pursuit. These tactics, however, cannot be isolated from the philosophy of the White House for the past five years.

There is much pressure at the present time, Mr. President, to determine who was ultimately responsible for Watergate in its various phases. The possibility of your personal involvement poses an embarrassing dilemma even for your friends. If you were aware of the conspiracy, you have participated in a crime. If you were unaware of the conspiracy, which touched at one point or another the most important personalities and agencies in your government, then the failure in leadership is, in a sense, even more disturbing.

As serious as this dilemma is, however, it is not the

most important question to be asked this morning. The crisis the nation faces, regardless of your particular role in the Watergate conspiracy, is still rooted in the fundamental mentality of your Administration. It is a mentality that could be described as absolute righteousness, holding itself above and beyond the law. Absolute righteousness quickly becomes absolute ruthlessness.

Basically this mentality rests on the mistaken assumption that the origin of legitimate power in government is the White House and not the people of the United States. The result is that the men you selected and inspired, Mr. President, used the tactics of the police state to meet what they describe as threats to national security. The plans for domestic intelligence-gathering launched by your Administration, the special investigative unit attached to the White House and privately financed, illegal wire tapping, illegal entry, the use of tax audits against political opponents, the withholding and falsifying information given to the public—these were the real dangers to national security, the real subversion. An Administration parading under the banner of law and order, considered itself above the law. A President, whose extraordinary career had been built on battling subversives, surrounded himself with men who made subversion the game plan.

How could this happen? Did the mistake lie in a fondness for the corporation mystique, an admiration for the methods of men who made money? Was the mistake to impose the techniques of American business on the process of American government? Was there too much of the image-maker's concern with selling the product, along with his occupational cynicism about telling the truth?

Or should we look further and find some clue in that rare, unguarded moment last November, Mr. President, when you told an interviewer that the American people needed to be disciplined like children? Children must, of course, be protected from freedom; Dostoevski's Grand Inquisitor argued that point quite well. But the American experiment was founded on the idea that citizens were not children but sovereigns.

No one ever claimed that a society of citizen kings could be a model of management efficiency. American democracy, with its clash of opinions and its checks and balances, is an untidy business. But when the last demonstrator has been swept from the sight of the White House, when all government agencies have become "politically responsive," when a cooperative media tells the American people only what is best for them to know, then the American experiment will be

over, the victim of subversion in the name of security.

Mr. President, it is always unfair for the preacher to single out one member of the congregation for advice and admonition. But our Sunday worship in the White House today is not typical. Like the other ministers of the Gospel who have preceded me here, I have come, in a sense, to your church rather than you to mine. It is your wish that we pray together here at the center of the nation's life, that we listen, reflect and respond to God's word. The double-edged sword that is God's word does not deal in comfortable images but in painful truth. It inevitably presents us with a crisis, a turning point, a time for judgment—the kind of crisis to be resolved only through honesty and courage, not through counterattack. Quite simply, the crisis God's word presents is a call for conversion.

This morning, then, may we suggest that our national crisis, like the biblical crisis, calls for conversion. The people need and wait for some clear-cut sign, some evidence of a change in mentality, some realization that the direction of the past five years must be reversed. The answer does not lie in withdrawal, retreat within an ever more narrow circle and a claim that the President has been the victim of Watergate rather than its intended beneficiary. The pattern of insulation must be broken decisively, dramatically, before it works its ultimate disaster.

The American people need a sign in order to regain their confidence in their government. They need to see a change in direction, not a display of stubbornness under siege. They need to see a government that will be open, that recognizes the necessity of an informed citizenry, with a faith in the intelligence of the community that is an essential condition of democracy, and a healthy detachment toward its own positions that is a protection against demagoguery. They need to see a government committed to the untidy process of democratic debate rather than the efficiency of the game plan. Most of all, they need, for the rest of your tenure, a deliberately nonpartisan Administration that will guarantee the political independence of our system of justice.

Is it presumptuous to speak of such things from a pulpit? Ordinarily, perhaps. But on this particular Sunday morning conversion has become not only a test of personal integrity but a condition of political stability. Only your action, Mr. President, can restore the faith of our people, and indeed of the world, in the integrity and stability of American government. The crisis will not be solved by silence.

