

## Storm Over the White House

The capacity of the President to govern effectively is determined by much more than constitutional provisions. It involves the elusive but very real factor of public trust. In this sense, then, the suspicion voiced at a recent Washington press conference concerning the sudden world-wide alert of U. S. forces was as much an index of Mr. Nixon's present capacity to govern as his frequent veto victories over the Congress. The Secretary of State was shocked that the question could even be raised. But it was raised, and it was not an isolated, outrageous stab by a hostile reporter, but simply the inevitable expression of a public cynicism toward the Administration that may be unprecedented in scope.

The calls for the President's resignation that have begun to be heard from political leaders and editorial writers, like the question at the press conference, both reflect and affect this public mood. The White House is mistaken if it believes that the drumfire of criticism directed at the President has been artificially manipulated by a hostile media. It is true, however, that public statements on the White House crisis do themselves become factors in that crisis. At a time when decisions of frightening proportions must be made, there is merit in the suggestion of Senator Barry Goldwater that restraint be exercised. If a dramatic change in our national leadership is necessary, it must be the result of sober reflection rather than political passions.

It is understandable that a people wearied and exasperated by the continuing shocks of the Watergate revelations would look for a swift, simple solution. But would the President's abrupt resignation provide such a solution? The unanswered questions would still hang in the air, to be seized and used as the fuel of endless political debate. The unraveling of Watergate must pursue its painful course no matter who is President.

What would be the consequences of the President's resignation? A Republican President must take his place if the clear mandate of the 1972 election is to be respected. In nominating Gerald Ford to be Vice President, Mr. Nixon selected a man personally acceptable to both houses of Congress. He did not—perhaps purposely—pick a man of clear Presidential stature.

It is difficult to measure the impact abroad if Mr. Nixon does resign in disgrace (and there will be no way to disguise the disgrace). Many of the initiatives in foreign policy undertaken in the last five years have

been generally admired. His successor would, of course, lack the personal stature as a world leader that Mr. Nixon now enjoys. At the same time redoubtable Henry Kissinger would presumably remain as Secretary of State and be a source of continuity in foreign policy.

The consequences of the President's resignation, then, are obviously serious, but they are not unthinkable. The conduct of the White House in the Watergate affair, particularly in recent months, seems based on the belief that Mr. Nixon is so indispensable to the role of the United States in the world that the public will eventually forgive and forget the shadowy adventures at home. If this calculation were correct, then the American people would have surrendered an essential element of our constitutional democracy: the accountability of the government to the governed. Like many of the other calculations of that tight circle of men around Mr. Nixon, however, this one, too, is in error. It is simply unacceptable to the American people that any President consider himself indispensable, a sovereign exempt from the fundamental law of the land.

Has the point of no return been reached or is it still premature to call for Mr. Nixon's resignation? Three months ago in these pages ("A White House Homily—Undelivered," 7/21, p. 23), it was pointed out that the answer was not retreat to the circle around the President. "The pattern of insulation must be broken decisively, dramatically, before it works its ultimate disaster." That same editorial urged the President to recognize that the American people needed to see a "change in direction, not a display of stubbornness under siege." Despite the many zigs and zags of the events and explanations that have emerged from the White House in recent months, there still has been no basic change in direction. Counterattack and evasion have remained the favored tactics, and they have only driven the President into an ever more isolated corner.

If Mr. Nixon is to salvage his Presidency, he must make that change of direction and do it quickly. He must find a way in which he can render his account to the American people. An appearance before the Senate Select Committee, unusual as it would be, may be the only effective forum left to him. If Mr. Nixon is unwilling or unable to render his account in this fashion, then he should be prepared to make a decent departure from the White House.

