

Editor's note: On May 9, 1974, the Chicago Tribune Editorial Board published this three-part editorial, calling for President Richard Nixon to either resign or be removed from office. The editorial was published a little more than a week after Nixon released transcripts of taped Oval Office conversations that he believed would exonerate him to a public grasping to understand his role in the Watergate affair. Instead, the transcripts hastened his political demise.

Listen, Mr. Nixon ...

We saw the public man in his first administration, and we were impressed. Now in about 300,000 words we have seen the private man, and we are appalled.

What manner of man is the Richard Nixon who emerges from the transcripts of the White House tapes?

We see a man who, in the words of his old friend and defender, Sen. Hugh Scott, took a principal role in a "shabby, immoral and disgusting performance."

The key word here is immoral. It is a lack of concern for morality, a lack of concern for high principles, a lack of commitment to the high ideals of public office that make the transcripts a sickening exposure of the man and his advisers. He is preoccupied with appearance rather than substance. His aim is to find a way to sell the idea that disreputable schemes are actually good or are defensible for some trumped-up cause.

He is humorless to the point of being inhumane. He is devious. He is vacillating. He is profane. He is willing to be led. He displays dismaying gaps in knowledge. He is suspicious of his staff. His loyalty is minimal. His greatest concern is to create a record that will save him and his administration. The

high dedication to grand principles that Americans have a right to expect from a President is missing from the transcript record.

Mr. Nixon's strategy backfired when he released the transcripts. It was also a strategic error for him to release the record of his income taxes. Both stripped the man to his essential character, and that character could not stand that kind of scrutiny. Both miscalculations demonstrated an essential Nixon defect — an insensitivity to the standards of ethics and morality that Americans expect of their leaders.

He thought disclosure of the records would help him. He has had a demonstration that his countrymen are not that tolerant.

And it should be noted here that the transcripts and the income tax statement were not the fabrications of his enemies. These were self-created instruments of destruction.

His decision Tuesday to disclose no more information leaves the record as it now stands. And as it stands that record leaves no doubt that he lacks the qualities that could edify and inspire his countrymen with confidence in these difficult times.

The statement of his counsel, James St. Clair, that the President is ready for a confrontation with Congress and his own special prosecutor is ominous.

The balance among the coordinate branches of our government — Executive, Judicial and Legislative — is fragile. It has been established on rather comfortably loose terms by nearly 200 years of experience in practicing the special virtues of American government.

The limits of executive privilege, of congressional power, of judicial authority are not rigidly fixed. We would not relish the prospect of forcing the Supreme Court to make hard decisions in the distorting heat of partisan controversy. This is one confrontation this country does not need and we pray Mr. Nixon will not insist on it.

The President is right in urging a quick end to the Watergate affair. His country needs a swift and merciful termination of this agony.

Two roads are open. One is resignation. The other is impeachment. Both are legitimate and would satisfy the need to observe due process.

... The two choices ...

Resignation of the President would be quick and simple and a qualified successor stands ready to assume office.

Impeachment is the judicial process prescribed by the Constitution for removing a President. The House can, and probably will, vote a bill of impeachment quickly. A trial in the Senate would be, and indeed should be, long and deliberate. No suggestion of haste or mob justice could be tolerated. The White House could be expected to seize every opportunity for challenge and delay, and the final outcome might be two years in coming.

The objection to resignation that has been raised — and we have raised it ourselves — is that it would not resolve the issues. It would not answer many of the questions about the President's behavior and degree of complicity. It would leave at least a suspicion that the President had been persecuted instead of properly prosecuted out of office. To some he might remain a martyr. To many it would seem a miscarriage of justice, an example of political exorcism.

The transcripts have changed all that. Though they may clear Mr. Nixon of direct complicity in the Watergate burglary and the early stages of the coverup, nobody of sound mind can read them and continue to think that Mr. Nixon has upheld the standards and dignity of the Presidency which he proclaimed himself as a candidate in 1960. He hoped that, if elected, a mother or father would be able to “look at the man in the White House ... and say, ‘Well, there is a man who maintains the kind of standards personally that I would like my child to follow.’ ”

We do not share the White House belief that impeachment requires evidence of a specific crime. We believe a President may be removed simply for failing to do his job, or for so discrediting himself that he loses public respect and, with it, his ability to govern effectively.

It is true that this vagueness may tempt opponents to seek to remove a President for political or otherwise inadequate reasons, as they did with Andrew Johnson. But that risk must be accepted. The ultimate arbiter in this matter must be the public, and the public reaction today is clearly one of revulsion. Republican politicians are defecting in droves. The evidence against Mr. Nixon is in his own words, made public at his own direction. There can no longer be a charge that he was railroaded out of office by vengeful Democrats or a hostile press. The fundamental questions have been answered. Filling in the gaps in the transcripts can only make the case against the President stronger.

And so the objections to resignation have largely vanished.

Since the President has rejected this course, we urge the House to act quickly on a bill of impeachment. As the impeachment process progresses, as public opinion becomes clear, and as Mr. Nixon sees support dwindling in the

Senate, he will have to reconsider his stand and recognize that resignation will spare the country the ordeal of a trial.

... And the cost of inaction

There are three urgent reasons for turning the reins of government over to a new President who can concentrate on his job, and for doing so quickly.

First, without decisive leadership in either foreign or domestic matters, the country will drift along aimlessly during one of the most critical periods of history. In country after country, governments are being toppled and threatened because of popular frustration over inflation, hunger, the energy shortage, and the apparent inability of governments to deal with them. It would be a tragedy for the richest and most powerful country in the world to stagger along, immobile, during such a period.

Second, Mr. Nixon has become a liability to his political party as well as to the Republic. The longer he remains in office as a symbol of Watergate and all it stands for, the more likely it is that the Republican Party will be incapacitated for years to come. The health of our two-party system depends on separating the Republican Party from the evils of Watergate and the character of the President.

Third, it is equally important for the future of the Presidency itself that it be separated from the man who now holds it. We must return to the day when people can shiver with pride instead of shudder with embarrassment when they see the flag or hear "Hail to the Chief." Many of the prerogatives of the Presidency are essential to the country, including secrecy when properly justified for reasons of national security or executive privilege. These principles have been prostituted in order to preserve Mr. Nixon himself and

those around him. The longer this goes on, the more likely those prerogatives are to be forfeited — in the public mind if not by act of Congress.

It is saddening and hard to believe that for the first time in our history, it is better that the President leave office than fight to keep it. But things have reached such a state that Mr. Nixon's departure, one way or another, is the best course for the Presidency, the country, and the free world. To perpetuate a state of confrontation between the Executive and Congress — in order to define the limits of power which are probably better undefined — will be tragically costly in the eyes of history and the world.