WATERGATE

A Psychological Perspective

by Robert J. Trotter

One year of Watergate is enough! Two years of Watergate is too much! But no matter what anyone says or does, it will be quite a few years before we really get Watergate behind us. Before Watergate is relegated to the historians, political pundits, politicians, participants in Watergate and a variety of novelists and movie makers will have their say. Psychologists and social scientists are no exception. Watergate has given them much on which to speculate, and some of the results of their theorization were reported at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association.

One of the most intriguing questions about the Watergate affair is: What made it happen? Bertram H. Raven of the University of California at Los Angeles has attempted to analyze Watergate in terms of group dynamics. His conclusions are based in part on a review of the transcripts of the President's tapes and testimony given before the Senate Select Committee and the House Judiciary Committee.

Conformity was once believed to be the major factor in making group decisions. People do tend to go along with the crowd. In recent years, however, social psychologists have reported on another phenomenon of "groupthink." "Risky shift" is the term used to describe the tendency of certain groups to become more extreme or to take riskier positions in their judgments. The risky-shift phenomenon is explained by the pressure of an individual within a group to at least equal or preferably exceed the group average. The trend, therefore, is not to keep up with the Joneses but to surpass them. When this begins to happen within a group, says Raven, the effect is a movable or runaway norm that leads to more and more extreme positions.

In the Nixon Group the norm was to be tough and strong, take risks and be uninhibited in dealing with the enemies—the press, the intellectuals, etc. Those who went the farthest in this respect rose the fastest in the group. Charles Colson, for instance, exemplified this attitude when he said, "I would walk over my grandmother if necessary." The lesson of Colson's rapid rise in the Nixon Group, says Raven, was not lost on other aspiring young men like Magruder and Dean.

Various falls from power were equally educational. Robert Finch and Herbert Klein, for instance, had reputations for being too soft. Following the Kent State killings, Finch and Klein persuaded the President to avoid a hard bayonet line in dealing with demonstrators in front of the White House, and argued for having young staff members meet with the demonstrators in a more conciliatory fashion. Finch and Klein won the argument but soon lost whatever power they had. The lessons were clear for all to see, says Raven. "To be a rising member of the team you had to be loyal to the chief, steadfast, strong, hard-hitting, merciless to your enemies and not get wound up worrying about the methods which you used." It is not hard to see how such attitudes could be behind the actions of Watergate.

The actions of people in the White House, however, are only part of Watergate. The reactions to what was going on in the White House provide psychologists with another area of inquiry. James B. Garrett and Benjamin Wallace of Western Illinois College have been investigating the great diversity of public opinion that existed during the unfolding of Watergate. While John Wayne was calling Watergate a "panty raid" many other people were calling for the impeachment of President Nixon.

Garrett and Wallace feel that the theory of cognitive dissonance can help explain some human behavior and motivation in a situation such as Watergate. The theory of cognitive dissonance suggests that after making a choice (between cars, presidents or whatever) people are subsequently motivated to believe that they have made the right choice and will commit themselves to that selection. Experiments have shown that people who purchase an automobile sometimes tend to seek out information (such as advertisements) that supports their choice. Even if the car is a lemon there may be a tendency to overlook faults and continue to praise the car. By consciously or unconsciously disregarding contrary information, people avoid a mental or cognitive conflict.

The cognitive dissonance theory was applied to Watergate. College students were polled. Nixon voters, compared to McGovern voters, were less likely to believe that Nixon had prior knowledge of the Watergate bugging or of the cover-up. And they were less likely to believe that he should be impeached even if he did know of them. Such people maintained cognitive consonance by defending their previous decision. Studies by other researchers have also shown that the theory of cognitive dissonance helps predict what people will believe about the Chappaquiddick incident or the psychiatric history of Sen. Thomas Eagleton (D–Mo.).

Another theory suggests that when people are assessing their own opinions, they are more likely to be swayed by similar than by dissimilar people. Garrett and Wallace set up an experiment in which 200 college students were asked if they would sign a petition demanding that President Nixon resign or be impeached. Half of the students were presented with a questionnaire by a group calling themselves "Republicans for Impeachment." The remaining students were approached by "Democrats for Impeachment." The students were also asked to indicate party affiliation and for whom they had voted for in 1972. As many as 75 percent of the Republicans said "no" to the petition when it was sponsored by the Democrats. Only 46 percent said "no" when the petition was sponsored by Republicans.

In another experiment Garrett and Wallace attempted to assess Nixon's credibility in areas other than Watergate. With the firing of Archibald Cox, presidential credibility hit an all-time low. Shortly after that, the energy crisis prompted President Nixon to make a nationally televised appeal for citizens to give their fullest cooperation in the efforts to conserve energy. The day after the broadcast questionnaires were used to ask students, "Do you believe President Nixon knew of the Watergate cover-up all along?" and "How willing are you to cooperate with President Nixon's appeal for energy conservation?" Nixon's credibility with regard to Watergate was found to be significantly related to willingness to cooperate on energy conservation—regardless of party affiliation. Those who didn't believe him were less willing to support the conservation effort.

"The potential determinants of attitudes on Watergate were, of course, not nearly exhausted," say Garrett and Wallace. "However," they go on, "of the ones that were tapped, it is clear that many psychological processes operate in determining opinions and establishing and even swaying attitudes toward such politically potent events as Watergate." And the full history of and psychological processes involved in Watergate should be investigated and understood because, as Raven (quoting George Santayana) reminds us "those who forget their history are doomed to repeat it." □

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