

Sincere According to Truth

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Energy. Economy. Honesty. Those are the three things that most concern the American people as the New Year comes in. I suppose only a few years ago, the word “energy” would have suggested bounding athletes, or even father marching up and down with the lawnmower. “Economy” would have meant nothing but thrift. Today, energy has a guilty sound: it’s what we need, and don’t have, to maintain for millions of people the most comfortable life any body of humans has known since the heyday of the Roman emperors, who did have central heating and sunken bathtubs, but never enjoyed electric toasters and fluorescent lighting and the telly and air conditioning, and the thrill of zooming along a motorway at seventy miles an hour. And “economy” means what is going to happen to our savings, and for many more millions than most of us care to admit—to our jobs. Only the word “honesty” retains its original meaning, and I imagine that a lot of Americans, naggingly disturbed by the shenanigans in the White House, are turning to the dictionary to see just what ought to be expected of a nation’s rulers. I am doing just that, taking my text not from the Oxford Dictionary but from the old, great, original American dictionary compiled by Noah Webster after thirty-six years’ labor and finished only three days before his death at the age of eighty-four. There we find this definition: “Honest: frank, upright, just, fair in dealing, sincere according to truth.”

I like “sincere according to truth,” a very necessary reservation. Because no one in our time was more “sincere” than Hitler, according to evil or mendacity. Well, in either the great English or the great American dictionary, I think the message is much the same. Our society has not yet had time to give a new and technological twist to an old word. And after the ordeal (and what many of us hope will be the purge) of Watergate, there is

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a new and troubled and rousing spirit in the land. Watergate is not only not over; the Senate Committee is back in business this week. And this month also three grand juries, which have been hearing evidence brought to them by the new Special Prosecutor Mr. Leon Jaworski, will decide whether or not to indict, among other suspects, the milk producers who gave over half a million dollars to the Nixon re-election fund shortly before the government announced a change in policy and permitted a rise in the price of milk supports. The man already convicted of running the secret White House investigating team known as “the plumbers,” by such illegal tactics as spying, bugging, and burglary, is to be sentenced this month, and it’s already known that he’s ready to talk. He knows a great deal, as does the President’s main accuser, John Dean, who’s also about to be sentenced. Somewhere along the line of these judicial processes, it may well be that we shall hear the sound that has for such a puzzling long time not been heard. It is the sound of the squealer. For whatever you may think or suspect about the President, the plain legal fact is that in all the long cast of shabby characters none of them has come forward and corroborated the damning accusations of John Dean that the President knew all about Watergate from the beginning. The continuing mystery of Watergate is how so many people involved in a plot could stay silent. It’s possible when two or three men conspire together that they can all tell the same story, whether it’s a true story or a bluff. But it is against all the habits of human nature for twenty or thirty men caught more or less in the act to keep their traps shut.

So, at the moment we are still bewildered, though in a quieter, chronic way. We still don’t have the answer to the first fundamental question. And nobody has said it better than Senator Barry Goldwater, the right-wing Republican who for so long was loyal to Nixon and believed the best about him. Senator Goldwater was interviewed on television last week. Whatever he’s saying it’s always a rare pleasure to hear a United States Senator talk plain English without the elaborate garnish of federal jargon that suffocates and disguises the meaning of what he might be trying to say. Goldwater was asked if Watergate had been fatal to Nixon’s continuing capacity to govern the country. And he replied: “I don’t think it’s Watergate, frankly, as much as it’s a question in people’s minds of just how honest is this man?”

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I hate to think of the old adage, ‘Would you buy a used car from Dick Nixon?’ but that’s what the people are asking around the country.”

To see that somehow or other the question gets answered, the Congress did something that six months ago would have been inconceivable, when the President, with the considerable backing of constitutional lawyers, was quoting Jefferson and other great men to say that Congress could never, under the Constitution, force a President to yield the records of his private conversations. His lawyers had done a deal of homework on the famous case of Jefferson versus the Supreme Court in a vaguely similar case; and without anybody’s noticing it, the President starting using Jefferson’s own phrase that the Supreme Court was a “coordinate, coeval” branch of the government and could never be superior to the President under the law. (Jefferson, by the way, in old age was almost gaga with the obsession that the Supreme Court had grown into a tyrant that would throttle the nation.)

Well, Congress has just passed a law that explicitly gives the courts the right to subpoena all the White House tapes and Presidential documents it wants. The courts alone are to decide which tapes concern national security, say, and should be kept secret from an investigating committee. Now the President could have vetoed the bill. But he didn’t. And the White House made the limp comment: “He knew a veto would be misunderstood.” So saying he would never yield, he yielded. I don’t imagine he ever dreamed what would happen next day. The Senate Watergate Committee issued subpoenas for nearly five hundred tapes and documents. Surely, somewhere in there somebody talked, somebody, in what was meant to be a highly secret record of White House dialogues, somebody must have dropped a hint, or boasted, or otherwise congratulated a colleague on the cover-up. If not, then the President would emerge as one of the most maligned and misunderstood Presidents in history. There are people who stubbornly believe so. But so far none of us knows.

Well, so much for the unflagging public concern about the President’s honesty: his “sincerity according to truth.”

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The problem of public honesty impinged on another of those three words this week. The word “energy.” The man in charge of conserving energy, who’s doing his damndest just now to prove Mr. Nixon’s point that the crisis is not critical enough to require petrol or oil rationing, put out another statement—a hope, rather—that people, you and me, would use no more than ten gallons a week—of petrol, that is. The distributors and oil companies have together agreed to sell no more than ten gallons to a customer. But this doesn’t prevent a man driving another few miles and stocking up on another ten. It is plainly unworkable. Moreover, there are many reports that petrol stations are hiking up the price of petrol as high as the traffic bears. There is a government-fixed price for petrol, but it’s being ignored wherever the wind blows cold or the trains don’t run. And over a continent that once had a railroad grid as dense as a spider’s web, you’d be surprised at the thousands of places—across many hundreds of miles—where no trains run at all because, since the highways took over the national shipment of freight, the railroads have gone bankrupt. Clearly, I should think, in a country also where ninety million cars are on the road at every hour of the day and night, the car-owner’s decision to use no more than ten gallons a week would constitute one of the most sublime acts of voluntary restraint in the history of human nature. There was a sign or two that the people most aware of this absurdity are the owners of petrol stations themselves. First of all, there are small towns through the Midwest and across the prairie that consist of two or three big motels, a supermarket, and no railroad station. They are quickly being cut off from, you might say, American life. And out West, the word has come in that petrol station owners, driven mad by obvious violators who own big cars, and therefore capacious petrol tanks, have actually started burning up, literally setting fire to, the same big cars.

Looking to the long run, and when things go bad most of us retire into mass cures, people are ready to believe that the great age of cheap fuel, of all the energy we need for our new-found comforts, is over. And they then say: the answer in the long run is a massive improvement in public transportation. And that means, to most people, a vast outpouring of money into rehabilitating the railroads. That and, as Washington and San Francisco are doing, building their first underground tube system. It

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sounds sensible enough at first glance. But unfortunately, it is sensible only if you glance at the America of 1910 or 1950, and not at the America of 1973. It would apply to an America where the railroads ran most places people need to travel. And, even more, to an America where the word “commuter” means a man, a worker, who lives in a suburb and commutes to the city to work. But, a government statistic just out gives a startlingly new definition to the species known as the “commuter.”

In the ten biggest cities in America, saving only New York, how many people do you suppose live in a suburb and commute to the city? Seventy percent? Eighty percent? No. Eighteen percent, only. More than half of the working population of this country live in one suburb and commute to work in another suburb. Henry Ford, the grandson of the man who started it all, put it tartly: “Subways, tubes, are fine for getting downtown and back. But most people don’t travel downtown and back any more. They travel all over the place. And you can’t build subways all over the place.” Or start, at this late date, building railroad tracks over hundreds of thousands of miles of empty land.

So Detroit, which has just laid off 290,000 automobile workers, looks to the long run. And the long run means contracts for nothing but buses.

That gloomy figure of the appalling, sudden unemployment in Detroit points to the third word: the economy. That is another story all in itself. We had better brace ourselves to go into it at another time.

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