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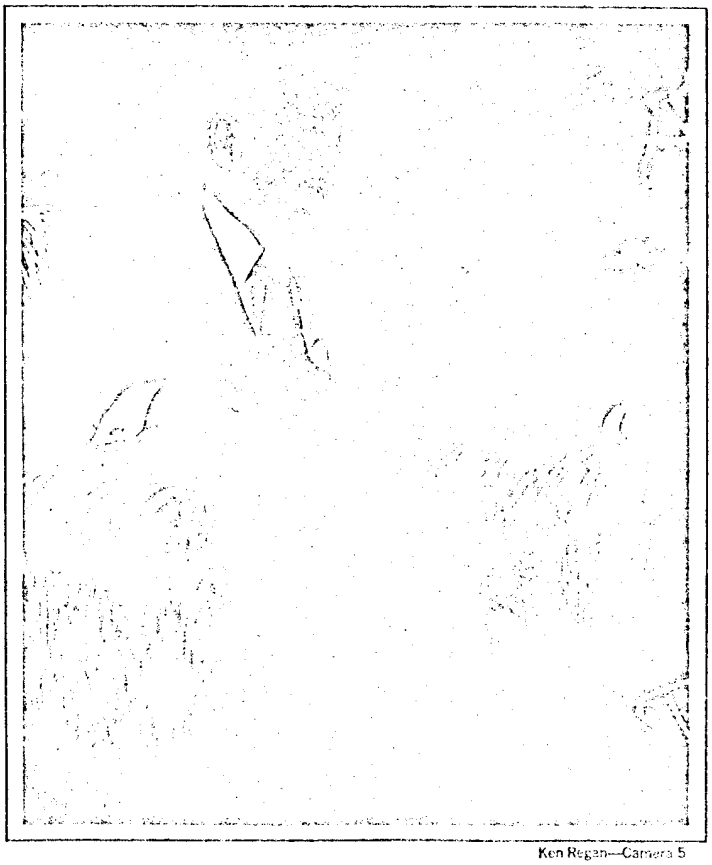
The Legacy of Wa

I would say that, as far as the country is concerned, after the understandable reaction immediately after Watergate with regard to politics generally, the castration of the CIA, the opposition to some of the attitudes toward the FBI, et cetera . . . the Watergate syndrome has probably run its course, and that is to the good.
—Richard M. Nixon on the CBS "Morning News"

There he was again, familiarly ill at ease, on early-morning TV, once more playing down the scandal that forced him to resign the highest office in the land. But Watergate was much more than a personal tragedy for a dishonored President: it was a rite of passage for the nation. And the "Watergate syndrome," which began with the disclosure of abuses in Richard Nixon's 1972 campaign organization, affected American institutions from the press to the Presidency itself. Ten years after the June 17 break-in at Democratic National Committee headquarters in Washington's Watergate complex, the legacy is still strong. It has curbed the FBI and the CIA, awakened a dormant Congress, visited the "post-Watergate morality" upon big business, and drastically altered the ethical standards imposed on public officials at every level of government.



Ken Regan—Camera 5

'I have nothing to add . . . I'm looking to the future rather than the past'

But now the pendulum is swinging back a bit, many politicians and historians agree, partly because some reactions to Watergate have proven unwieldy, others counterproductive. "Whenever you have a national trauma of that magnitude, the reforms that rear in behind it inevitably go too far," says San Francisco businessman William Ruckelshaus, who resigned as deputy Attorney General rather than fire Watergate special prosecutor Archibald Cox at Nixon's behest in 1973. And while many find the higher level of public skepticism about politics and government engendered by Watergate to be healthy, others see a dangerous cynicism that clogs the democratic process, making it difficult for political leadership to get others to follow. "I think the general public thinks all of us are crooks, and I really reject that idea," says Georgia State Sen. Julian Bond.

Along with the reforms, the Watergate legacy includes some fascinating sidelights, including a legion of dramatis personae (page 42) who are older and presumably wiser, and some of whom —like John Ehrlichman, H. R. (Bob) Haldeman and Nixon himself (page 38)— are considerably richer. Watergate also produced a lexicon of its own or

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Speaking for themselves through the sampling of a new NEWSWEEK Poll, a vast majority of Americans (75 percent) believe that Nixon's actions regarding Watergate were serious enough to warrant his resignation—more than thought so at the time he stepped down. But the numbers opposing a pardon granted him by Gerald Ford—and opposing a return to public life by Nixon—have eroded with the years. Most of those polled also continue to see Watergate as an extraordinarily serious matter because of the corruption it revealed, but the passage of time and disclosure of improprieties in other administrations have apparently increased the number who believe it was politics as usual. Far more thought changes prompted by the scandal were beneficial than thought them harmful—but a plurality of about 40 percent said they saw no significant changes at all. And fully 53 percent said they thought the abuse of Presidential power revealed as a result of Watergate could easily happen again.*

If such abuses recurred, that would reverse one of the post-Watergate era's most significant achievements—the dismantling of the "imperial Presidency." Cox, now the chairman of Common Cause, believes that the Supreme Court decision forcing Nixon to supply subpoenaed White House tapes for a criminal investigation forever demolished the notion that "if the President does it, then it cannot be wrong." And post-Watergate disclosures showed that Nixon was extreme but not alone in his Presidential improprieties. "Watergate was a reflection of how bad off we had become," says historian Gary Wills of Northwestern University. "We had turned to spying on ourselves; Presidents were setting up teams to topple foreign governments." Former White House counsel John Dean agrees, finding "a surprising degree of continuity between one Presidency and the next on what is acceptable conduct. Watergate snapped that continuity; it could have grown worse down the line."

But the snap caused some problems of its own. Historian/

*For the Newsweek Poll, the Gallup Organization interviewed 519 adults by telephone [illegible] points.