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THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

March 10, 1975

MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT

THROUGH: DONALD RUMSFELD

FROM: ROBERT GOLDWIN *RAG*

SUBJECT: Fortune Interview

For a bicentennial issue, Fortune wants to ask the President whether he thinks "the American system" is still working. It is not a very interesting question to ask the President: Everyone knows that the President will answer yes. One way the President can make the interview interesting is by delving into the meaning of the question, rather than by simply answering it.

Why do they ask whether the system is working? They start with the fact that we have severe problems: Too many people out of work, business still suffering from the effects of a sudden economic turn-down, prices high and going higher, inaction in Congress on vitally needed legislation, like the tax cut--and all of this at a time when there is a Democratic majority in Congress and a Republican President, when the President and Vice President have come to office by other than the usual process of election, when talk of new political parties is heard, just after Watergate, and so on. The question is not whether these are serious and difficult problems--they are. The question is whether these problems mean that "the system" is in danger, or is not working.

One test would be to ask whether we are likely to go on for another hundred years, under the Constitution, changing

as much as but not more than we have in the last 100 years, perhaps facing problems like the ones we face now, but coping with them, as we are now.

There is no sure way to know the future, but it might be instructive to consider what had been going on at the time of the Centennial, in 1876. We were struggling with the aftermath of the Civil War, ended only a decade before. One of the most corrupt Administrations in our history, was just coming to an end. It was so bad that President Grant delivered a speech of apology to Congress before leaving office. There were impeachment proceedings against his Secretary of War that year, who resigned to avoid trial. There were four parties in the presidential campaign that year, ending in the Hayes-Tilden controversy, the most dubious election in our history. The evidence seems clear that the election was stolen, but the deals were so massive and complicated that they stagger the mind of a historian or a politician of the 1970's. In the Panic of 1873, over 5,000 businesses failed and the New York Stock Exchange had to be closed for 10 days. There was farm unrest and labor unrest, and there was a military catastrophe--General Custer and all of his men were wiped out at the Battle of Little Big Horn.

Was the American system working in 1876? The answer, I think, is yes, but not as well as it should. Is it working in 1976? The answer is, I think, "yes, somewhat better than 100 years ago--but not well enough."

I make this distinction. The problems are severe and numerous. They test us, as a nation and as a people. But they do not call into question the survival of the system. We have faced problems of a similar nature, 100 years ago in fact, and here we are 100 years later, still struggling, still facing up to our problems, still strong, still free, and ready for another 100 years and more.

Perhaps we ought to think about this word "system." It could mislead us into thinking that our form of government works like a machine, automatically and mechanically. The Constitution provides for legislative, executive and judicial branches, but it doesn't assure us that they will be sensible or far-sighted or courageous or persisting. A democratic republic can make mistakes, serious mistakes, and whether we approach our serious problems effectively or foolishly depends on our character, our judgment, and our self-discipline, as much as on our "system."

For example, much depends on how clearly we can look ahead. We have had the tendency in recent decades to try to eradicate burdens without considering how much the programs may cost in later years and whether we will be able to pay for them. This has given us massive uncontrollable programs which go on year after year, as if they have a life of their own, and whose cost cannot be planned or controlled. Transfer-payment programs and trust funds are the major examples of uncontrollables. "The system" will not protect us against adding to our future difficulties. If we do some long-range thinking and exercise a strict sense of responsibility for the future of our children and our nation, "the system" makes it possible for us to save ourselves from the danger.

We must also have the character to deny ourselves hasty actions for appealing reasons. The catalytic convertor is only the most recent example of errors we can make in haste for a seemingly good cause. It was difficult to oppose, even on the grounds of taking time to think. No one wants to seem to be against clean air. But now we find, hundreds of millions of dollars later, that catalytic convertors not only do not help, they actually add a wholly new form of pollution to the air we breathe. No political "system" can succeed completely in protecting us against our own follies, although some of the procedural safeguards of "the system" sometimes help.

The constitutional system is designed to give us ample time for deliberation. Some safeguards slow down hasty action that might be foolish. But the basic and most powerful principle is rule by the people, so that the safeguards can only slow down, they cannot ultimately thwart the demands of the people. We ought to remember our capacity for foolish actions sometimes when we get impatient with the length of time some legislative programs take, and not tamper with the beneficial procedural safeguards that are part of the system. But the same safeguard that might prevent foolish action may just as well delay wise and timely action, which is what is now happening in the case of the tax rebate and tax reduction, in my opinion. That is what I mean when I say that "the system" is not the issue, but wise judgment and effective action in dealing with our problems.

Finally, we ought to answer the question not only in comparison to the United States 100 years ago, but also to other countries today. Other free nations are suffering similar difficulties, and are struggling to cope with harsh new circumstances. In many other nations, the regime is either Communist or military. Are we still strong and free? Are we in danger of losing our independence or our liberties? That may be the best test of whether the American system is working.

The answer is clear, in my opinion. The United States is strong and will not lose its independence. The American people are free and their liberties are secure. By that standard, "the system" is doing fine, thank you, and can look forward confidently to another hundred years--full of difficult troubles and problems, but also rich in the probability--not a certainty--of coping successfully.