Assistant Professor of Political Science Jeffrey Pressman, Professor of Government Richard Neustadt of Harvard, Sorensen, and Rev. John Crocker, head of the Technology and Culture Seminars.

The Presidency After Watergate

(Continued from page 1) outlined briefly on Tuesday and Wednesday evenings and in more detail on Thursday evening, would be to make the president more “accountable” through increased efforts on the part of Congress, the judicial system, particularly the Supreme Court - the press, and the people to expose Presidential actions.

The Congress has enough power over the president “to dispel the need to limit presidential power any further.” Sorensen noted. The problem, he continues, is that Congress “has not had the guts” to use the controls at their disposal.

Sorensen bitterly criticized the courts for their “institutional timidity,” saying that “the Judiciary has thus far (with the notable exception of the Supreme Court decision on the Nixon tapes) contributed almost nothing in the area of presidential accountability.”

The press should intensify its “adversary position” with respect to the president in order to increase “its oversight function,” Sorensen said. “But for the Washington Post and a few other newspapers,” he exclaimed, “the press was actually quite slow in dealing with the real facts of Watergate.”

Finally Sorensen spoke of the people “exercising moral restraint” when choosing the president. He urges people to more closely examine the character of potential presidents.

Sorensen does not accept the argument that the presidency should be weakened as a result of Nixon’s extravagant usurpations of power, such as ordering the invasion of Cambodia. Powers should not be taken away, he asserts, that were never justifiably there to begin with.

Nixon, Sorensen said, “failed in his drive to become a strong president.” His interpretation of executive privilege “was rejected by the courts, Congress and the people.”

“Had Nixon succeeded in getting what he wanted,” Sorensen said, “a dictatorship might have resulted which would have made Mussolini look like another goon.”

“But Watergate reflects the weaknesses - not the strengths - of an administration working in an atmosphere of frustration – not power.” He continued: “So let’s not talk about dispersing presidential powers further to cause future presidents to look for new devices to achieve their ends in a new atmosphere of frustration.”

Sorensen also rejected such proposals as allowing the president a single six year term, pluralizing the executive branch, or replacing our system of government with a parliamentary system. “None of these systems would have necessarily prevented Vietnam or Watergate,” he said, emphasizing that we must approach the “political and operational problems” within the present framework to arrive at any viable solutions.

Sorensen’s respondents in the seminar, on Tuesday Anthony Lewis, national correspondent for the New York Times, and Alan Otten, Washington Bureau Chief of the Wall Street Journal, essentially agreed with his position.

Lewis declared that “the Constitution works better than any other governmental device.” Therefore, he said, “we should focus our attention on the character of the human beings in office.” For example, Nixon, he said, “had the fatal characteristic of repeating his mistakes” in a self-destructive manner.

Like Lewis, Otten felt that “we should be a hell of a lot more careful about who we put in the presidential office in the first place.” He too was opposed to institutional changes but offered that the Congress hasn’t used its influence over the president enough. “Congress gave Nixon too many wide grants of power,” he said.

The seminar was sponsored by the MIT Political Science Department, the Technology and Culture Seminars and the MIT Press, which will be publishing a record of Sorensen’s lectures as a book this winter.