

Mr. Nixon's 'Performance'

The best authority on President Nixon's personality, even if unwittingly so, is Richard Nixon himself. He has consistently, even compulsively, told us how he acts and how he intends to keep on acting. Yet, we have just as consistently, it seems, refused to believe him. In short, President Nixon's current "performance" runs true to his past patterns of behavior; a glance at the latter helps us to penetrate beneath the outer trappings of Nixon's handling of the present Watergate "crisis."

The first thing to remember is that Nixon is a highly trained actor. As his early girlfriend, Ola-Florence Welch (now Mrs. Johe) commented, he had "an almost instinctive rapport with his audience." Dr. Upton, one of his Whittier College teachers, added that "I taught him how to cry in a play by John Drinkwater called 'Bird in Hand.' He tried conscientiously at rehearsals and he'd get a pretty good lump in his throat and that was all. But on the evenings of performance tears just ran right out of his eyes. It was beautifully done, those tears."

Let us look at Nixon's dramatic news conference in Florida a week ago with these comments in mind. The conference was part of the President's announced attempt to go on an energetic offense, after long months of isolation. It was preceded by what can only be called "rehearsals" with small groups of congressmen, summoned to the White House on five separate occasions (taking up time the President has constantly told us cannot afford to snatch from pursuit of the national interest). After these in-town "road shows," the real show, of course, was put on in Florida. The flavor of that performance was simply not conveyed in the cold print of the following day: it had to be seen to be understood.

Even with the tryouts, the President was still obviously nervous and on the defensive in the opening minutes. Then, suddenly, with the questions about his personal finances, Nixon was able to establish his "instinctive rapport" with his audience. He had found his "role," as the poor but honest and hard-working boy, who had made good on his own, whose integrity was now unfairly being challenged by his enemies. It was the same role as in the "Checkers Speech"—but now, instead of a "cloth coat," we have the image of a Vice President retiring in 1960 with only a little money and "a 1958 Oldsmobile that needed an overhaul," and a President in 1973 who doesn't have a trust fund or stocks.

Nixon played it to the hilt. Suddenly, instead of the *injuring* party, the possi-

ble instigator and coverup man of the Watergate matter — Nixon had become the *injured* party, fighting to clear his good name of the sneers and charges unfairly brought against him. His "defense" was not really intended to be an acceptable legal presentation — disturbing inconsistencies lurked in the wings at all times, with only national security to cover them over — but it was effective, and even convincing, drama.

Only at the very end did Nixon overreach himself. He insisted that the milk-fund issue be raised against him, ordering the TV networks to carry him live for a few minutes beyond his allotted time. He had forgotten his earlier comment, in reference to the Hiss case, that "from considerable experience in observing witnesses on the stand, I have learned that those who are lying or trying to cover up something generally make a common mistake—they tend to overact, to overstate their case." Nixon, too, was overstating his case asking us to believe that the President who insisted that he would not be swayed from principle by practical politics, and whose veto until that time had never been overridden, would give in to pressure from a small number of congressmen, mainly Democrats, who wished to raise the price of milk. The consequent payment of money by the milk industry to the campaign to re-elect the President was, of course, merely one of those unforeseen coincidences that seem to plague the "deplorable" Watergate issue. Alas, Nixon's acting in this crisis had toppled over into overacting, thereby giving the show away.

Would this President twist the truth, as well as "act"? It is President Nixon himself who has told us how, in the past, he has done exactly that, in the interest of national security. In the 1960 debate with John F. Kennedy over the Cuban issue, Kennedy accused the Republicans of do-nothingism and advocated strengthening the Cuban "fighters for freedom." As Nixon tells the story in "Six Crises," Kennedy knew the CIA had a plan to invade Cuba; in fact, Nixon's account is inaccurate. In any case, Nixon goes on to explain what motivated him to substitute fiction for fact in the debate.

Mr. Mazlish, the author of "In Search of Nixon," works in the field of "psycho-history." He is a professor of history at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

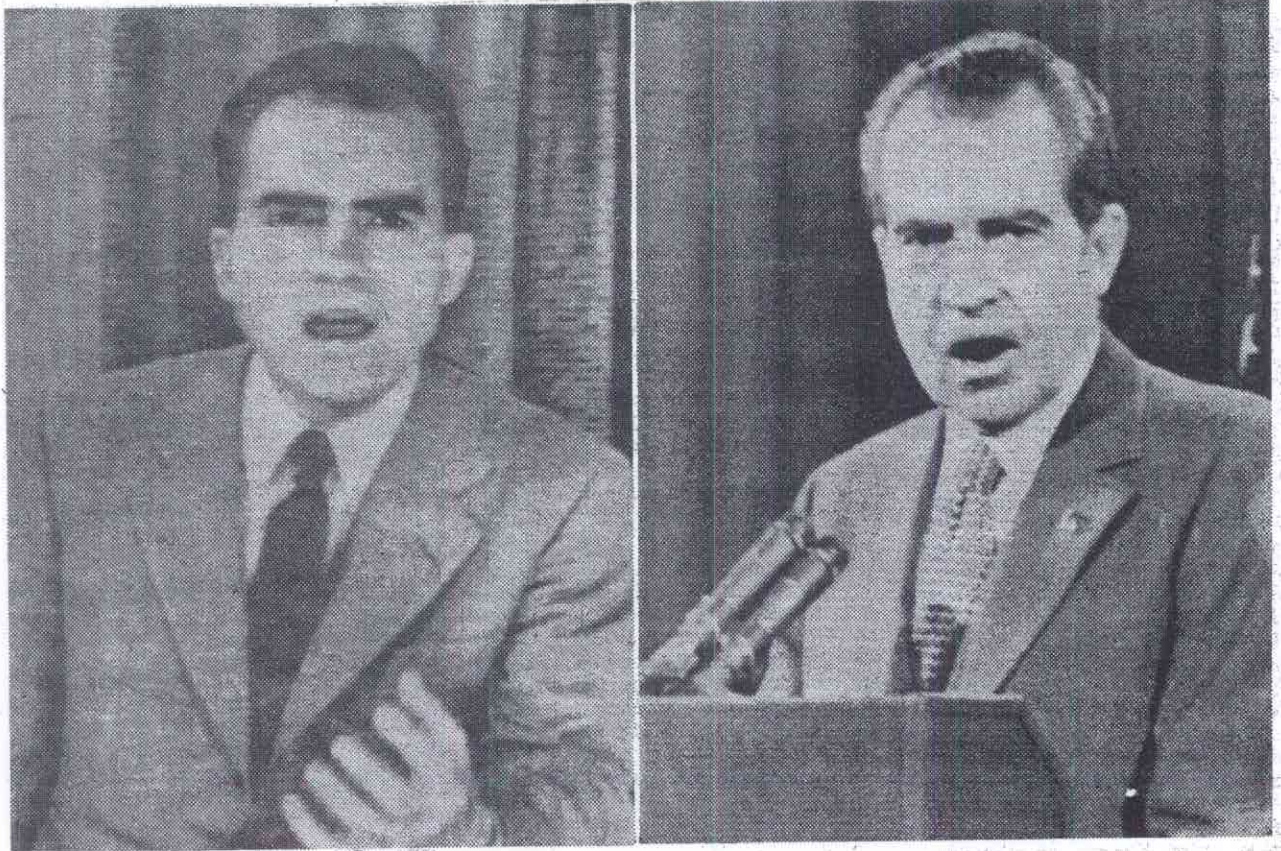
"What could I do? One course would be simply to state that what Kennedy was advocating as a new policy was already being done, had been adopted as a policy as a result of my direct support, and that Kennedy was endangering the security of the whole operation by his public statement. But this would be, for me, an utterly irresponsible act: it would disclose a secret operation and completely destroy its effectiveness.

"There was only one thing I could do. The covert operation had to be protected at all costs. I must not even suggest by implication that the United States was rendering aid to rebel forces in and out of Cuba. In fact, I must go to the other extreme: I must attack the Kennedy proposal to provide such aid as wrong and irresponsible . . ." When Nixon then told us that "I do not want to say anything or do anything during the campaign that I will not be able to live with as President" we are left breathless at his *own* open revelation of his duplicitous statements.

If the past is indeed prologue to the present, then Mr. Nixon has told us how he would act where national security matters are concerned. The issue then becomes one of how national security is defined and who defines it. If Nixon identifies himself with the national interest and with America's "mission of peace," as he does, then by an understandable logic, or rather *psycho*-logic, attacks on him become attacks on the national interest and the structure of peace that he is erecting.

More recent events and statements only confirm our view of Nixon's behavior in this area. The secret bombing of Cambodia, accompanied by false public statements that no such

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Mr. Nixon's 1952 "Checkers Speech" and his press conference in Florida Nov. 17.

thing was being done, as well as the falsification of records submitted to the Senate Armed Services Committee concerning that bombing, are all in an established pattern. The repetition in Florida of his mistaken assertion that Jefferson had offered only "a summary" in the Burr case, when Nixon and his lawyers had been publicly corrected on this point a few weeks earlier, is startling in its audacity. His constant claim that he wants all "the evidence out" on Watergate, and the fact of his efforts to withhold all possible data until forced to reveal it, appears to open a large gap between rhetoric and reality. In this regard, there is his extraordinary "oversight" in not informing his lawyer, Charles Alan Wright, that two of the nine tapes sought by the court did not exist. Nixon was informed on Sept. 29 that the two tapes were missing; on Oct. 23 Wright, still left in the dark, declared that "everything called for in the subpoena will be produced." When asked, "What you have said here about the tapes supporting the President is based upon what the President told you, and not upon you hearing the tapes?" Wright replied, "Exactly so. I have the old-fashioned American habit of believing Presidents of the United States." It is exactly this "old-fashioned habit" that makes it so difficult even to contemplate a President twisting the truth. Yet, the fact is that we find ourselves, somewhat startled, in an atmosphere of deliberate half-truths, if not complete fabrications, generally justified by national security requirements. Alas, if we had glanced at Nixon's own description of his behavior, and taken it seriously, we would have been better prepared to understand the paradoxical but fundamental honesty in his character. We would have known, in other words, that he would run true to form in this matter.

Because he believes so well of himself, denying to himself even the possibility of angry or immoral acts, President Nixon is not being a hypocrite in his statements. He believes with total conviction in the role he is playing at any given moment; it is the source of his power over his audience. Interestingly enough, it is Henry Kissinger

who has best explained what is involved in his leader's (and his own) performance. As Kissinger tells us, in an extraordinary revelation:

I am always convinced of the necessity of whatever I'm doing. And people feel that, believe in it. And I attach great importance to being believed: When one persuades or conquers someone, one mustn't deceive them. If I acted merely on the basis of a calculated technique, I should achieve nothing. Take actors, for instance; the really good ones don't rely on mere technique. They also follow their feelings when they play a part. Like me they are genuine.

Nixon, too, is "genuine" and never more so than when he is acting a part, such as that of the aggrieved innocent man.

Acting, role-playing, denial—these patterns of behavior have been constant throughout Mr. Nixon's life. They are, of course, combined with many others, some highly commendable, such as perseverance and hard work, as well as with more disputable traits in the American constellation of values, such as day-dreaming, dependency wishes, and a tendency to isolation.

Perseverance itself is his greatest

strength: he won his wire rat in this fashion, hung on to the vice presidency in this manner, and earned his party's presidential nomination in 1968 in the same way—and now he faces Watergate with the same perseverance.

Hard work: In his address on the fuel crisis, he promised us he would not walk away from his job: "As long as I am physically able, I am going to continue to work 16 to 18 hours a day for the cause of a real peace . . ."

Day-dreaming and fantasy: Asked the other night what he would do after retirement, the same Nixon who on his 60th birthday advised us "never slow down" and earlier had characteristically commented that "any person tends to vegetate unless he is moving on a fast track," now expects us to believe that he wishes solely to retire to his writing.

Only if we remember his earlier remark in an interview of the mid-60s, that "if I had my druthers, I'd like to write two or three books a year, go to one of the fine schools—Oxford for instance—just teach, read and write." Do we realize, perhaps sympathetically, that we are listening to a Nixon day-dreaming aloud, with all the unreality attached to such activity.

Isolation: As we all know, the removal of Haldeman and Ehrlichman has meant only the substitution, except at moments of frenzied PR efforts and counter-attacking such as we are now going through, of Haig and Ziegler. As former Deputy Attorney General William Ruckelshaus reminds us, the particular chain of events that led to the ouster of Special Prosecutor Archibald Cox was brought about by the President's isolation from his own Attorney General: "The President really didn't see Elliot Richardson all week until 3:30 last Saturday afternoon, which is when he went over with his resignation." It is, of course, that same isolation from the advice of others which is now leading Nixon to his misguided efforts to impune Mr. Richardson's integrity.

One could go on and on. The President's pattern of behavior is consistent and stable. While specific interpretation of any one action is made difficult by the problem of interpreting which particular trait is uppermost at any one moment, and how all of the traits mesh with one another and with the political realities surrounding him, we can in fact be confident that Nixon's behavior is neither "unstable" nor "irrational." In the sense I am employing here, it is highly rational, orderly, and patterned. His entire political life offers us self-delivered clues as to that pattern. It also suggests to us that, although Nixon has compared himself to such figures as Lincoln, Wilson, and Disraeli, he should really be thought of as the Houdini of politics. Out of self-constructed locks and boxes, he has consistently been able to escape in the past. It remains to see whether in this present case—the Watergate caper—Nixon will once again be able to break free.