

The Fall of Nixon: What We Must Not Forget

by Rollo May

On August 8th, along with millions of other Americans, I watched a tragic drama on television. It could have been entitled "The Downfall of a Man." It was the final act fulfilling the fate of a man who believed that life consisted of playing roles—his role, in this case, being the self-centered usurper of power. It dramatized the downfall of this man who had climbed to power over the ruined careers of countless adversaries; a man who, judging from his comments during conversations he himself had had secretly "bugged," was willing to jettison everyone, even his former best friends, if it served his purposes; a man who, having broken those standing in his way, then used his newly gained power to block justice and avail himself of even greater power.

I saw this man being broken.

Little does it matter that Richard Nixon was not aware of the tragedy he was enacting. If anything, this fact makes the drama more tragic. As I watched I felt a great sadness that a human being should go through such a profound moment and not even know it. Here was a broken man conducting himself as if he were making a campaign speech.

But Nixon's capacity to blind himself to reality, to ignore his own real motivations and the very real consequences

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of his decisions and acts, is the same error we all will be committing if we try to pretend that the entire Watergate affair never happened, if we try to forget the resignation of Richard Nixon.

I believe it is crucial that we keep clear our vision of what did occur—and what justice is, how close we came to losing it and what the final outcome means to America. It is important to keep in mind that the downfall of this man is an event that has profound and historic implications for the future of the nation. Hence I want to discuss several of the deeper lessons we can learn from this most fateful event.

Among the multitudes who watched Nixon make his resignation speech, there was obviously a vast difference in attitudes toward him. At one extreme was the group which felt vindictive. They quoted Harry Truman: "Nixon is a shifty-eyed God-damned liar and the people know it." These persons smelled blood; they clamored for Nixon's prosecution for criminal acts. But they often did not see that clamoring for further punishment is dangerously like one of Nixon's crimes: pressuring the courts to carry out his own private aims.

The problem with this attitude is that it places vengeance above constructive actions. Those who have it forget that justice is infinitely more important than private or public vengeance. Now, with President Ford's pardon of Nixon, the possibility of vengeance has been removed in any event.

At the other extreme were those individuals who believed through all the controversy that Nixon was basically right and that the only regrettable thing was that he got caught. They would advocate doing the same thing over

again if the law at the time were sleeping. Ethics do not figure in this attitude; principles are ignored in favor of expediency. Perhaps the shock of all the events leading up to Nixon's resignation may bring persons with this attitude into a deeper understanding of the importance of public and private morality.

I wish, however, to consider the matter in a different light, neither condemning nor condoning. I am concerned with what Aristotle calls *tragic catharsis*—the cleansing or purifying of emotions experienced by members of the audience as they vicariously live through a dramatized tragedy. By confronting us with the emotions of terror and pity, the dramatist illuminates our own fears and sorrows and, if only by revealing their universality, brings us a kind of release.

The terror in this instance is linked to the thought: What if Nixon had succeeded in saying, as did Louis XIV, "I am the State"? What if he had succeeded in making himself superior to the courts, so that you and I would never know when we were going to have our telephones tapped or be visited by the FBI or harassed by Internal Revenue agents? What if Nixon had succeeded in gaining such power that, as historian Henry Steele Commager states, he would have destroyed the very essence of this nation as the Founding Fathers established it?

The fact that Nixon could use his power in such high-minded ways as the establishing of friendly relations with China and Russia and use it at home in such selfish and unethical ways evokes a sadness that reflects a sense of regret for what might have been, if only the (Continued on page 166)

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man's nature had not been so fatally flawed. And beyond sadness is the pity that flows from an awareness of the pain and unhappiness suffered by the wives and children of men sentenced to jail for actions taken in support of an unprincipled President.

On a deeper level, however, true pity expresses a feeling of identity with the protagonist of a drama. We recognize ourselves in the tragic figure. Whether his deeds were good or evil, whether he embodied the majesty of Lear or the subservience of Willie Loman, is beside the point. The identification

rests on the recognition of the humanness that is shared. Perhaps we would, like Nixon, be blind to justice when it suited our desires; perhaps we would exploit others to achieve our goals; perhaps we would cut corners on our income taxes—or perhaps we would not. But beyond all this we share with him the human traits of ambition and pride—and a terrible fear of what it must be like to be hurled from the heights.

It is out of this awareness, and this sense of sharing, that, if it is to occur at all, catharsis must be born. It is born of the wish to avoid such a tragic fate and it creates in each of us a powerful impulse to rededicate ourselves to principles that will defend us against such a catastrophe. Thus are we affected by the pathos in the experi-

ence of Lear and Loman—and Richard Milhous Nixon.

It is possible to understand some of the psychological influences which mold the moral character of a man like Nixon. Indeed, those of us who are therapists often must deal in our clinical work with individuals of similar character, and we need to ask what impels a man to be so consumed by the desire for personal power. What must be changed if such a person is to be helped? This is why compassion is essential for the work of a psychoanalyst—compassion for the person, no matter how great his crimes. Without this we could never make real contact with the individual we are trying to help.

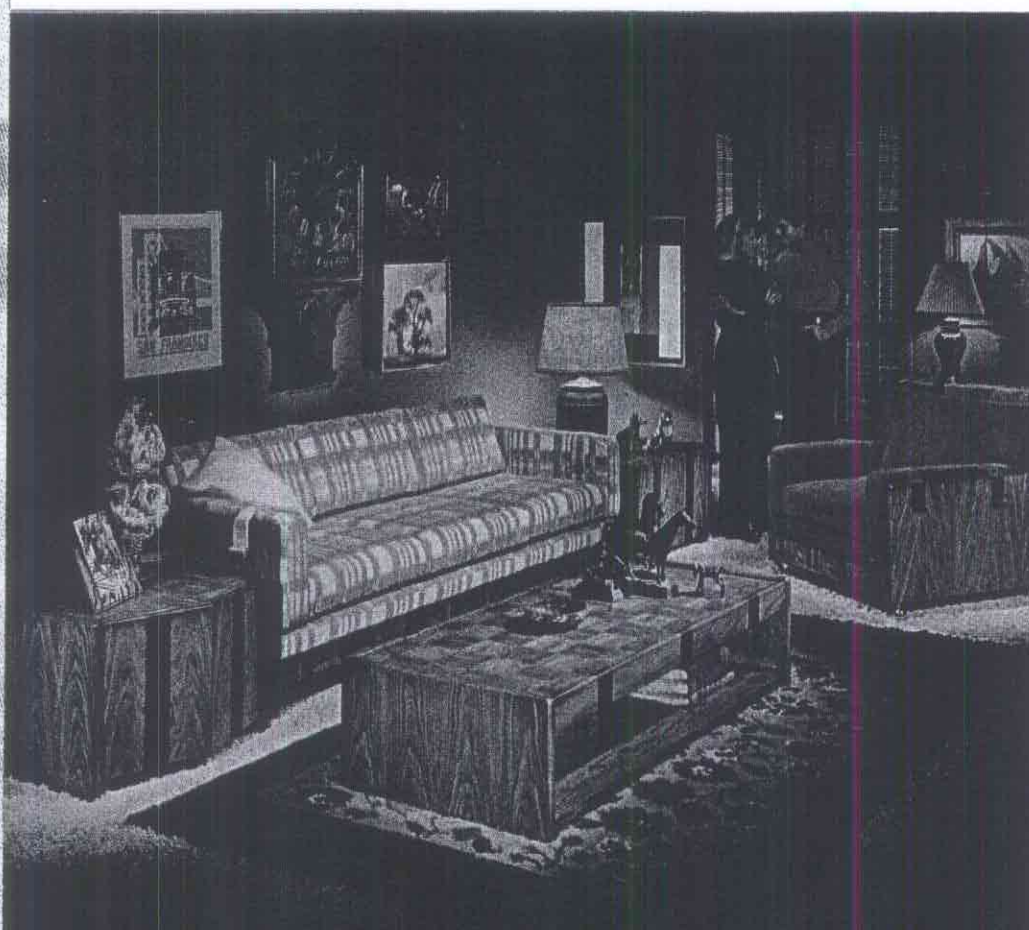
In Nixon's case it seems obvious that at some early point in his development he became convinced that the only way to acquire status—to be somebody—was to possess power. No doubt he must have been deeply humiliated when, as a very small child, he tried to do things that would make him loved by those he esteemed—tried and failed. Humiliation is often experienced as the subjective side of powerlessness. This feeling, developing over the years in ways impossible to pinpoint, emerges in later life as a conviction that the one thing that matters is power. He must always be in command.

Thus motivated, Richard Nixon committed the ultimate evil, characteristic of this type of man: He identified his own power and personal well-being with the general good—that is, with the welfare of the nation itself. In Greek tragedy the term is *hubris*—arrogant pride or self-confidence. As Edith Hamilton notes in her book *The Greek Way*, "The arrogance that springs from a consciousness of power was the sin Greeks hated most."

In religious tradition this is called "original sin." It is the tendency of every human being to see the world in terms of his own private needs and desires, to place himself egocentrically—personally at the center—in the universe. In the course of a lifetime, each individual's struggle to achieve maturity consists of movement away from such an egocentric position—to learn to see ourselves as others see us, to empathize with our neighbors, to value communal principles as much as private desires. In the course of human history, the same evolutionary process characterizes the development of culture and civilization.

But self-centeredness is a constant temptation to us all, and the man of power in a technological society is in special danger of succumbing. (We need only recall the classic statement of Charles Wilson, then a former president of General Motors, on being named in 1953 to the cabinet of President Dwight D. Eisenhower: "For many years I thought what was good for our country was good for General Motors, and vice versa.")

The protection against this evil consists of authentic humility and a



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sense of common humanity—two emotions Richard Nixon could not permit himself because he so feared being vulnerable. Unable to step outside the steely emotional shell he created for himself, he lacked self-recognition. Thus there was no self-awareness possible in the unfolding tragedy of his downfall. On television the evening of his resignation, we saw the same ploys he always used in talking—the same cloudy eyes, the same theatrical gestures, the same sentimentality (which is the use of sentiment for its effect on other people rather than as a genuine expression of feeling). We saw the gestures and heard the tones with which Richard Nixon conveyed a characteristic impression of profound and resolute phoniness.

Beyond all this, however, what we saw and heard that night was something he did not intend us to see or hear: the collapse of a human being. He could not say it because he could not acknowledge to himself that his world had come to an abrupt end.

The honest self-awareness that Nixon never achieved can be seen in *Oedipus at Colonus*, the Sophocles drama. Standing in a grove of trees before a group of citizens of Athens, Oedipus, this now-aged man who has suffered so much and learned so much, cries out, in effect: "Yes, I killed my father, I married my mother. I take responsibility for these awful realities." But he refuses to grovel in guilt. Near the end of the drama, he proclaims:

"One soul, I think, often can make atonement
for many others, if it be pure. . ."

Out of such a sense of responsibility comes *metanoia*, a "turning about," a conversion. This is what gives tragedy its profoundly cathartic effect upon us; at its conclusion we have the feeling that life cannot, must not, be the same as before.

There were a number of men in that sorry group of Watergate offenders who did "turn about." Jeb Stuart Magruder, John Dean, Charles Colson, all realized and admitted the wrongs they had helped to perpetrate. Egil Krogh, the first of the group to go to jail, articulated his changed outlook with a penetrating remark: "A country that freed Ellsberg and puts me on trial instead can't be all bad—right?" It makes one feel like saying, with a sigh of relief, "Thank God someone catches on."

Even though the chief character in the drama did not recognize it, the downfall of Nixon is a vindication of our yearning in America for a justice that transcends power. For two years our courts of justice and our Congressional representatives moved at a turtle's pace; the Constitution and our entire legal system seemed creaking and inefficient. Yet ultimately the principle of justice and the supremacy of law did prevail.

The symbol of the goddess of justice, bequeathed us by the ancient Greeks, is that of a noble figure holding out a pair of scales on which truth is to hang in the balance. She is blindfolded, and this is often thought to mean that justice itself is blind. But the blindfold signals the need for justice to remain uninfluenced by the status and prestige of the persons being judged.

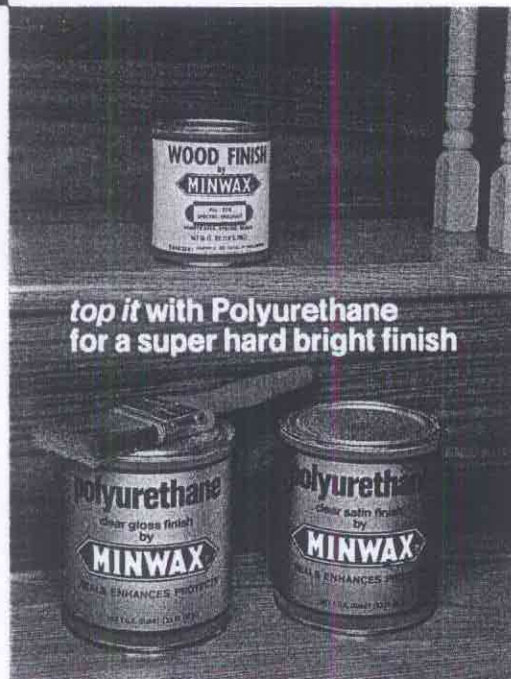
Many of us believed that this was demonstrated by Nixon's downfall. But President Ford's untimely pardon highlights the paradoxical nature of justice. There is an eternal dilemma between dispensing justice and granting mercy. It is a just act to be merciful—but we dare not forget that mercy is intended to serve us, as compassionate human beings, to temper justice, *not to negate it*. The negating of justice risks making a mockery of principles of law. It establishes two different standards of justice and is, therefore, categorically evil.

Justice, however, is an ideal. It is never finally achieved, must always be striven for. For it is no less true of justice than it is of liberty—eternal vigilance is the price.

There is a period of time after a death has occurred when what is called the "work" of mourning must be completed if the grieving person is to go on living a healthy, constructive life. This work requires remembering the person who has died and allowing the natural sense of grief to give way gradually to a renewed sense of purpose and hope. In a similar way we must not allow ourselves to pretend that Richard Nixon's downfall is to be put out of mind quickly, now that he has been pardoned. In remembering the tragedy and comprehending its consequences, which at the time of this writing are far from over, we are freeing ourselves to move forward as a nation.

The resignation of Richard Nixon will not solve the grave problems this country still faces. But at least we can take confidence and hope from the fact that at a crucial moment in our history we prevented the personal usurpation of power. Now we must move ahead by rededicating ourselves to the principle of equal justice for all human beings and to commit ourselves with devotion to serve those other causes for which justice is required: economic equality for Blacks, full psychological enfranchisement for women, establishment of legal rights for children and mental patients, and the elimination of poverty and hunger.

THE END



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