

George F. Will

Box 21874

# A New 'Checkers' Speech? Would It Work?

We are reeling toward a rendezvous with Checkers—not the dog, the speech. Mr. Nixon may soon have to deliver a Watergate speech using the tactic of the original Checkers speech.

In September 1952, after just six years in politics, Mr. Nixon was Dwight D. Eisenhower's running-mate. Suddenly the story broke about an \$18,000 "fund" provided by California supporters to help Mr. Nixon (whose Senate salary was \$12,500) defray political expenses. The New York Post headline read: "Secret Rich Men's Trust Fund Keeps Nixon in Style Beyond His Salary."

The fund was small and similar to those used by many other politicians at the time. But the GOP was calling its campaign a "Crusade for Political Purity." Criticism snowballed and prestigious newspapers called upon Mr. Nixon to resign from the ticket. Mr. Eisenhower leaked his opinion that the burden was on Mr. Nixon to prove himself "clean as a hound's tooth" or resign.

Paradoxically, Mr. Nixon, the least rhetorical of men, saved his career with a devastatingly effective speech.

An hour before the broadcast Thomas Dewey, a close adviser to Mr. Eisenhower, called Mr. Nixon to say that most campaign leaders wanted him to resign. Mr. Nixon responded with a lesson in effective rhetoric. He confounded his enemies in the press, and Mr. Eisenhower, and the many Republicans who thought his resignation would help the party that fall.

With his career hanging by a thread, he skillfully played on the nation's emotions, and then boldly called for a plebiscite. It was syrupy. It was cloying. It also was a roaring success.

Mr. Nixon, the knight of the woeful countenance, talked to the national audience about Mrs. Nixon's "respectable Republican cloth coat," and about the "little cocker spaniel dog" that 6-year-old Tricia had named Checkers. Then he rolled the dice:

"I don't believe I ought to quit, because I'm not a quitter... But the decision, my friends, is not mine... I am submitting to the Republican National Committee tonight, through this television broadcast, the decision which is theirs to make... and I am going to ask you to help them decide. Wire and

write to the Republican National Committee...."

Before the speech, editorials and telegrams to Mr. Eisenhower were running about 3-1 against Mr. Nixon. When Mr. Nixon finished his speech, there was not a dry eye in America. Well, almost none. There must have been a hard glint of anger in Mr. Eisenhower's eyes. He knew Mr. Nixon had deftly deprived him of the final decision about his running mate. An emotional plebiscite, with a million pro-Nixon voices, settled that.

Today, as in 1952, Mr. Nixon is teetering on the brink of disaster. He cannot wrest the power of decision from Congress, where the impeachment procedure must result in an up-or-down vote, but he can try to set an emotional climate for the vote.

Of course here's the rub: He can call spirits from the vasty deep, but will they come when he calls?

When in 1952 he staked everything on a desperate call for support, he was a sympathetic figure, a young senator whose family shared his privations in the rich man's game of politics. Today he's known, rich and a sympathetic fig-

ure only to about 26 per cent of the people.

In addition, the "fund" was a public relations problem. Watergate is, at least in part, a legal problem. But when Congress has custody of your legal problem, and you have few arrows left in your quiver, you reach for one that served you well in another crisis.

You reach for a rending speech, one that pulls out all the emotional stops, and emphasizes the torments suffered by those who unquestionably are innocent bystanders—your family. And you conclude: "Wire Congress—get it off my back, and off my family's back."

Such a "Checkers II" speech probably wouldn't work. But it might produce a margin of survival in a close show-down vote in the House or, later, in the Senate.

This much we know. Mr. Nixon is as tough as a 20-minute egg. He will not sit passively while Congress votes on his fate. He will call an emotional plebiscite, if he has no other weapon left.

As an admirer of Charles de Gaulle, he knows the risks of such a maneuver. As de Gaulle learned in 1969, you can't afford to lose plebiscite.