Judgment Under Pressure

By Jules Witcover

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FOR VETERAN Nixon-watchers, it is axiomatic that in times of crisis for the President one necessarily turns to his revealing examination of self under stress, "Six Crises." From it, we can conclude that the current period after his staff housecleaning in the Watergate case must be among the most difficult he has faced.

In the past, this man of many crises has been especially wary of the post-decision period. And although the Watergate crisis is obviously far from over, the President's decision to remove three key White House aides and the attorney general has ushered in at least a breathing spell for him.

Of such lulls, Mr. Nixon wrote the following, referring to his successful fight to stay on the 1952 Republican ticket with Dwight D. Eisenhower:

"The point of greatest danger for an individual confronted with a crisis is not during the period of preparation for the battle, nor fighting the battle itself, but in the period immediately after the battle is over. Then, completely exhausted and drained emotionally, he must watch his decisions most carefully. There is an increased possibility of error because he may lack the necessary cushion of emotional and mental reserve which is essential for good judgment."

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And in prefacing his final chapter, on his losing race for the presidency against John F. Kennedy in 1960, Mr. Nixon wrote:

"The most dangerous period in a crisis is not in the preparation or in the fighting of a battle, but in its aftermath. This is true even when the battle ends in victory. When it ends in defeat, in a contest where an individual has carried on his shoulders the hopes of millions, he then faces his greatest test."

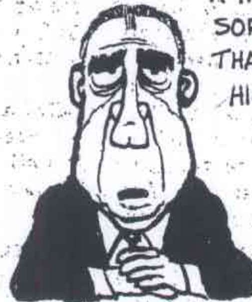
The Peak Came Monday Night

THE PEAK OF THE current crisis for Mr. Nixon was, of course, his nationwide television address Monday night from the Oval Office. In its maudlin tone, it was not unlike his famous 1952 "Checkers" speech, in which he defended his $18,000 special fund and saved his place on the Eisenhower ticket.

After that 1952 telecast in Los Angeles, author Nixon wrote, Eisenhower lauded him in a speech in Cleveland and sent him a congratulatory telegram, but it never arrived. The first reaction the vice presidential candidate saw was a wire-service report that Eisenhower said he couldn't make a personal decision until he saw Nixon in Wheeling, W.Va.

"For the first time in almost a week of tremendous tension," Mr. Nixon wrote, "I really blew my stack. 'What more can he possibly want from me?' I asked. Not yet having a full report of his Cleveland speech, my reaction was that he was being completely unreasonable. I had been prepared for a verdict. I was expecting a decisive answer. I didn't believe I could take any more of the suspense and tension of the past week.

"I announced to everyone in the room that if the broadcast had not satisfied the General, there was nothing more I could or would do. I would simply resign rather than go through the stress of explaining the



whole thing again. To demonstrate that I meant exactly what I said, I called in Rose Woods [his secretary, then and now] and dictated a telegram of resignation to the Republican National Chairman.

"She of course did not send it, and [Murray] Chotiner [his political adviser at the time] took the copy and tore it up. The next day when I learned the whole story—and the accurate one—of Eisenhower's reaction, it was quite clear to me that I should have waited for all the facts before going off half-cocked."

After the Battle

LAST MONDAY NIGHT, after what almost certainly was Mr. Nixon's single most important television appearance since the 1952 "Checkers" speech, he surprised reporters by walking into the White House press room and going to the dead microphone there. Gray and solemn, speaking in a low voice, he said simply:

"We've had our differences in the past, and just continue to give me hell when you think I'm wrong. I hope I'm worthy of your trust." With that, the President turned and walked out. He had, at this critical juncture, remembered his own admonition about an emotional and mental letdown "immediately after the battle is over."

It is an admonition that Mr. Nixon has not always kept in mind under stress. On the morning of Nov. 7, 1962, only nine months after "Six Crises" was published, he forgot it in an impulsive outburst that has become the personal nadir of the Nixon story. Weary from a futile all-night vigil in his losing gubernatorial race against Gov. Edmund G. "Pat" Brown, prodded by demands from the awaiting press that he concede in person, Mr. Nixon stormed into the press room and conducted his famous "last press conference."

It was not a press conference at all, but a rambling, discordant, sometimes accusatory, sometimes patronizing monologue that stripped him bare as a bitter, uncertain, utterly shattered man.

From this undisciplined tirade came the remark that was to become the cliche of the Nixon political obituary: "You won't have Nixon to kick around any more." And so it certainly seemed then. The performance measured for many the depth of the man's political plunge. In forgetting his own warning against a post-crisis letdown, he paid a severe price.

Since that time, however, there has been considerable evidence that Mr. Nixon has learned his own lesson well. There have been occasional outbursts in crisis—his bitter attack on the Senate in 1970 after it had rejected for the second time a Nixon Supreme Court nominee from the South; another time in 1970, shortly after his invasion of Cambodia and the Kent State shootings, when he referred to campus demonstrators

during a Pentagon visit as "these bums . . . blowing up campuses." But by and large his presidency has been marked by personal aloofness and above all, self-control—buttressed by insulation from the spontaneous and the unpredictable.

Control and Insulation

THESE ARE, NOTABLY, the same traits he demonstrated in his tightly controlled and insulated presidential campaigns of 1968 and 1972. Control and insulation have likewise characterized the conduct of business in his administration and especially in his White House—whence now comes the defense that, alas, he didn't know what was going on in his 1972 campaign because those around him didn't tell him.

As he labors now in one of the consequences of that intentional, self-enforced solitude—the Watergate case and all its ramifications—Mr. Nixon seems so far to be walking the cautious path he ascribed for a man who has just put his all into the making of a crisis decision.

On Tuesday afternoon, the day after his TV speech, he met with members of his Cabinet and, according to some of those present, admonished them to guard against any letdown, to work their way out of the present adversity.

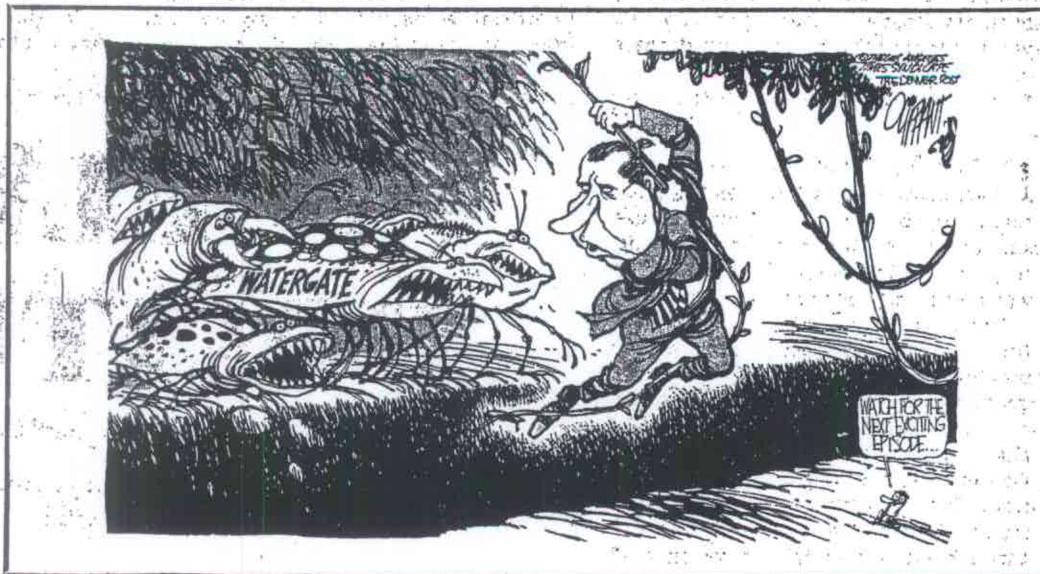
At one point, according to a White House aide, the President, sober but determined, acknowledged that although the outlook was difficult, there had been worse times in other presidencies. He compared the present situation with the forced departure of chief presidential aide Sherman Adams in the Eisenhower administration. Then, he recalled, Adams was to Eisenhower not only the equivalent of both H. R. Haldeman and John D. Ehrlichman, the two chief Nixon aides who had just resigned, but also of Dr. Henry Kissinger, the Nixon national security ad viser who is staying on. But Eisenhower hac had a fine Cabinet that rallied behind him he said, and he himself had a fine Cabine that would do the same.

Some Lapses of the Control

THERE WERE SOME glimpses of tense ness, some present said. At one point they said, the President expressed unhappi ness with the conspicuous manner in whicl FBI agents were guarding the files of Halde man and Ehrlichman and other deposed aides. And near the end, commenting or Sen. Charles H. Percy's call for an independ ent special prosecutor in the Watergate case, Mr. Nixon said Percy would never be come the Republican presidential nominee as long as he had anything to say about it.

Sen. Hugh Scott of Pennsylvania, the Sen ate minority leader, told aides later tha when he congratulated the President on his Monday night television talk, Mr. Nixon seemed to choke up, and his words came haltingly. The overall impression of other witnesses, however, was that the President in perhaps his greatest crisis of a trouble-filled public career, was keeping a firm grip on himself.

The Watergate crisis, as already noted, is not over by a long shot. The current post-decision period of "greatest danger" that he described in "Six Crises" may be no more than an interlude in what many now are calling his Seventh Crisis. The Nixon-watchers—and we are by now a nation of them—will be observing him assiduously to see whether he can continue to follow his own advice against letdown and consequent error or irrationality. For the country's sake, Republicans and Democrats alike must hope, in the critical days and weeks ahead, that he will.



"By golly," cried Dick as he swung to safety, "someone will pay dearly for this!"