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David S. Broder

Mr. Nixon's Next Move

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A **DOUBLE DRAMA** is unfolding in Washington these days, half of it on the public stage and half — the more intriguing half — obscured from view.

The public drama of Watergate is the gradual revelation of the dimensions of the conspiracy, in which increasing numbers of high officials are accused of subverting, for their own aims, the electoral, judicial and governmental processes.

At many points, the allegations have pointed to the possible complicity of the President, whose pronouncements on the case have failed so far to stem the increase in public skepticism about his own protestations of innocence.

While that public drama is still in the early moments of the second act, Washington's attention is turning increasingly to the other and more shrouded scenario: that unfolding in the mind of Richard Nixon. Here the questions concern Mr. Nixon's picture of himself, of his place in history, and of his capacity to lead the country in the next three and a half years.

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ULTIMATELY, they come down to a double-barreled question on which neither history nor psychology offers us much guidance: How does a

man in a position of high authority recognize when the source of his authority has eroded, and how does he react to that knowledge?

His first instinct undoubtedly will be to try to ride out the storm. Bruce Mazlish, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology historian, wrote in his year-old "psychohistorical inquiry," called "In Search of Nixon," that one of the President's most important psychological mechanisms is the use of "mammoth denial as a defense against unacceptable impulses and feelings."

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IN THE CASE OF WATERGATE, Mr. Nixon is denying not only any foreknowledge of the crime but any realistic appraisal of its consequences for him and his administration. He told last week's Republican party fund-raising dinner that "this deplorable incident," as he chose to call it, would not "deter us or deflect us from going forward toward achieving the great goals that an overwhelming majority of the American people elected us to achieve in November of 1972."

For the President to maintain that the revelations of the past month have not cheapened his victory or reduced his ability to carry out whatever he conceives as the mandate of the 1972 election is a "mammoth denial" of reality.

What will Richard Nixon do if all his denial mechanisms fail him and he is forced to face the realization that his capacity to lead the country has been fatally compromised?

No President has ever resigned. It is worth recalling that those who considered themselves close students of the men were flabbergasted when Harry Truman and Lyndon Johnson, when confronted with crisis, took the lesser step of voluntarily declining to run for re-election. And Richard Nixon is far more secretive than either of them.

That is why one senses that of all the Watergate dramas, the private struggle occurring inside the mind of the President could have the most dramatic curtain line.

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