

# The Morals Charge

By Russell Baker

OBSERVER

What is alarming about the Republicans' rush to abandon the good ship Nixon is the high moral posture they are striking as they go over the side. Being repelled by a President's moral standard is Billy Graham's work, and when you see politicians usurping the job it's time to hie to the church door and chain the poor box.

A group of politicians deciding to dump a President because his morals are bad is like the Mafia getting together to bump off the Godfather for not going to church on Sunday. It just isn't done in such circles.

There may be sound legal reasons for getting Mr. Nixon out, but the debarking Republicans are not talking law. They are talking morals, and a politician talking morals needs to be taken with a heavy dose of stomach powder.

The chances in this case are that moral outrage cloaks a writhing mass of self-interest, that what really worries the boys is not the state of the President's morality but the lively possibility that they will all be wiped out in the next election unless they are shed of him fast.

This sudden concern about morality began with publication of the transcripts of the Watergate tapes, which is odd. If morality in the Administration was ever to be invoked as justifiable cause for condemning the President, a far stronger case could have been made years ago regarding his conduct of the Vietnam war.

And yet those who raised moral objections about Vietnam were generally viewed by politicians of both parties as soft-headed bleeding hearts trying to corrupt the professionalism of government by injecting criteria that belonged in the pulpit.

By any reasonable moral standard, the Nixon of the Watergate tapes seems a fairly decent fellow compared with the Nixon of the Christmas bombing of Hanoi, or the Nixon who made war by personal decree on Cambodia.

In fact, the private Nixon we meet in the Watergate transcripts seems a far more human fellow than the public Nixon we have watched on television all these years. The public Nixon had the look of a manufactured man who might have been kept stored in a White House closet between public showings.

The private man of the tapes is a far superior creature, if only because he has the defects of humanity. The now famous cussing, which is part of the base for the charges of moral inferiority, may be mild stuff compared with the truly magnificent barracks language of Lyndon Johnson, but it is still evidence that he is real.

Some might say that the private

Nixon is not a very likable man. He doesn't trust people. He is given to petty backbiting. But these are common characteristics even among ordinary men, and in any event there is no requirement that Presidents be likable chaps, only that they be able to deceive the majority into believing they are likable.

On the other hand, the private Nixon also has moments of touching sensitivity for other people. He frets about the pain being inflicted on the families of the young men caught up in the scandal and finds it too "painful" to face his old friend John Mitchell in person and tell him he must take the fall. This is a far more likable Nixon than the public Nixon pronouncing determination never to grant amnesty to the draft evaders.

His great weakness, we discover, is the very weakness any one of us might suffer in his position. He is, surprisingly, indecisive. In a terrible pickle, he cannot bring himself to do the decisive deed that would change all the terms of his problem. Instead, he sits about for hours and hours talking, talking, talking, considering possibilities and weighing "scenarios," but never reaching a decision.

It is a weakness in a President, undoubtedly, but not so terrible perhaps as the weakness of the public Nixon who was forever turning up on the telly just at dinner time with yet another dynamic Presidential decision, which often turned out to be another disastrous appointment to the Supreme Court or another extension of the war.

Frozen in indecision, he acts far too human, with annoyed petty slurs on people who have got him into this mess, by listening to obviously larcenous schemes for buying his way out, by groaning that he wished tomorrow were Saturday, or that he wished he could chuck the whole thing and let Agnew be President.

A good deal of the time, he is simply incoherent, as who wouldn't be, having that nightmare to deal with? His knowledge of the law seems muddled at best and from time to time, like any human being, he sits there wishing the whole thing would go away so he could do the kind of work he enjoys, parleying with the Communists.

The trouble may be that the private Nixon, being indisputably human, is so different from the public Nixon that the public may believe he came to office through false pretenses. But the issue is not morality, as the Republicans insist. It is whether the Republicans can survive the public's shock at discovering that Nixon is real.