



BY STEWART ALSOP

MR. NIXON'S SUPER-CRISIS

WASHINGTON—President Nixon is now faced with yet another of all those crises he keeps having and likes to write about. The Watergate crisis could be the biggest of the whole lot, for if he fails to resolve it with fair success his authority as President will be disastrously undermined, for all the long years he must still remain in office. In this super-crisis, fortunately, the President has one great and vital asset.

His asset is this. With very few exceptions—maybe a third of the readers of *The New York Review of Books*, say, plus a handful of grizzled old Democratic pros to whom any Republican disaster is a delight—the American people want to think that the President himself was never personally involved in the sleazy Watergate business. Solid proof that the President was not involved would cause the vast majority, liberal Democrats included, to sigh a great sigh of relief.

The reason is obvious. The American system is flexible, and can take many wounds and hurts. What it cannot take is the proof, even the strong, unresolved suspicion, that the Chief Executive himself was personally involved in crass illegality. That proof, even that suspicion, could destroy the system. That is why the President faces this new super-crisis with a great many people who dislike him a great deal hoping that he will come through this one unscathed.

To persuade people to believe what they already want to believe is thus now the President's first order of business. To that end, he has another important asset. It is inherently unbelievable that Richard Nixon, the most experienced professional politician in the United States, could have permitted himself to become personally and provably involved in such amateurish nonsense.

FRONT AND CENTER

To exploit these twin assets, the President has adopted a strategy whose broad outlines are already clear. In the first place, he, Richard M. Nixon, will now move front and center. He will himself be the chief investigator, the chief bringer-to-justice of those who have sinned.

He has already signaled this intention. Beginning on March 21, he said at his recent press conference, "I began intensive new inquiries into this whole matter." Note the first person—it was

"I," Richard Nixon, and no one else, who began the intensive new inquiries. As a result, "I can report today that there have been major developments in the case concerning which it would be improper to be more specific now, except to say that real progress has been made in finding the truth."

Here is no hint of a man on the defensive. Instead, here is Richard Nixon, the exposé of Alger Hiss, in his old role of investigator-sleuth-prosecutor and finder of the truth.

The President, in short, has shrewdly chosen for himself the role to be found in certain detective stories. This is the role of the leading suspect who, at the crucial moment, suddenly reveals that he is, and has been all along, the detective, thus at one stroke proving his own innocence.

This role will permit him, if he plays it shrewdly and well (which seems safe to predict), to pre-empt other investigations of the Watergate affair, like the Ervin committee investigation. It will be much better for the President himself to announce a "major new development," especially a damaging development, than for Senator Ervin to announce it.

DANGERS

This role which the President has chosen for himself is not without dangers. The futures of some ambitious younger men, and the reputations of some proud older men, are at stake. May not one or another of these men be tempted to play Samson in the temple, to bring the whole Nixon edifice crashing down to destruction?

May not one or another of them say, under oath: "But of course the President knew what we were doing—knew it and favored it and ordered it in the first place"? But if that were to happen, the would-be Samson would probably fail. It would be his word against the President's, and, as noted earlier, the vast majority of Americans would in this case be ready, and eager, to take the President's word.

The temple could probably be brought down only if a memorandum ordering the Watergate bugging or some other nefarious business could be produced, with an approving RMN scribbled on a corner. That, for reasons also noted earlier, can almost surely be ruled out.

So the odds seem, to this writer, that

the President's strategy will work, and that the President will come through this super-crisis without fatal hurt. He will probably be hurt somewhat, of course. He will be hurt by the old rule that a man is judged by the company he keeps. It is now clear that the company Mr. Nixon has kept has done some wicked and illegal things. It is also clear that the company he has kept has done a lot of clownish and ludicrously amateurish things, and this may hurt more. "Put not your trust in princes," the Psalmist warns. For Presidents, the warning might be paraphrased: "Put not your trust in zealous amateurs."

A POLITICAL PLUS?

Yet it is at least possible that, if he is shrewd, and lucky, the President may emerge from this whole sleazy, grubby, nasty business with something like a net political plus. I find myself recalling a small episode that occurred in Springfield, Ill., in 1952, during the first Eisenhower-Nixon campaign.

With two old friends—Arthur Schlesinger and Clayton Fritchey—I watched the famous "Checkers speech" by Vice Presidential candidate R.M. Nixon. "That's it," said one of us (I can't remember which one) as the broadcast ended. "The American people just won't buy that manure. Eisenhower's had it. Stevenson's in." And all three of us experienced political observers nodded sagely at each other.

The Checkers speech, according to later reliable estimates, was worth around a million votes to the Eisenhower-Nixon ticket. The great rancid American people had been, in their mysterious way, much moved by the spectacle of the beleaguered young man, his political life at stake, baring his soul before them.

One can imagine a spectacle in some ways different—more dignified, more Presidential. One can imagine an aging President, all political ambition behind him now, telling more in sorrow than in anger the sad story of how he was betrayed, not so much by the wickedness as by the zeal of those who wished to preserve certain American values in which they deeply believed. One can also imagine the President himself imagining something of the sort, as he stares into the middle distance, and scribbles on his yellow pads, and ponders how to deal with this latest and greatest of all his crises.