

Crisis and Its 'Exquisite Agony'

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The President did not have to describe how it felt, a public man caught in the crucible of an epic political crisis, forced to explain himself before the national audience of television.

Richard Nixon has been there before. "Exquisite agony," he once called it.

"When a man has been through even a minor crisis," Mr. Nixon wrote some years ago, "he learns not to worry when his muscles tense up, his breathing comes faster, his nerves tingle, his stomach churns, his temper becomes short, his nights are sleepless.

"He recognizes such symptoms as the natural and healthy signs that his system is keyed up for battle. Far from worrying when this happens, he should worry when it does not."

More than anything else, more than ideas or programs or personality, crisis is the mark of the man's public career, a measure which he popularized himself in his memoirs of the 1950's, "Six Crises."

"Crisis can indeed be agony," he wrote. "But it is the exquisite agony which a man might not want to experience again—yet would not for the world have missed."

Doubtless, Mr. Nixon does not at the moment

feel quite as philosophical about his present crisis. His two most trusted, most powerful associates resign in scandal, the White House counsel fired, the Attorney General compromised. The house-cleaning will be followed by grand jury action, by more public inquiry, and probably by more recriminations among the Nixon men themselves over who launched the illegal espionage in last year's presidential campaign and who covered it up.

This one is enormous beside all the others. It is more threatening than any of the other temporary episodes, large and small, from which Mr. Nixon emerged each time larger and more successful than before, a rare political resilience that is being tested once again.

By his own recounting, Mr. Nixon's career was studied by dramatic moments of crisis—his expose of Alger Hiss in 1948, the "Nixon Fund" scandal of his 1952 campaign for Vice President, the suspense of President Eisenhower's heart attack and the suggestion that Mr. Nixon would be bumped as a second-term running mate, the mobs that stoned his car in Caracas in 1958, and his hair-line loss to John F. Kennedy in the 1960 presidential race.

Since he wrote that book, the man has been in major

crises at least three or four times more. In 1962, he lost his "cool" after defeat in the California governor's race and lambasted the reportres at his "last press conference."

A few years later, after his stunning political comeback had made him President, Mr. Nixon was facing global crisis, notably when he launched a U.S. invasion of Cambodia in the spring of 1971 and when he ordered the mining and retaliatory bombing against North Vietnam last year. In both instances, he was bombarded by hostile public reaction, but the controversy never reached its current peak.

Even if Mr. Nixon's national television address stirs a swell of public sympathy, as his famous "Checkers" speech did in 1952, the remainder of his term will still be marred by the tangle of courtroom action surrounding Watergate. And his reputation will be haunted by the question that once seemed wildly impertinent: What did the President himself know?

Haldeman, Ehrlichman et al stayed notably close to the Oval Office in every important decision. Mr. Nixon himself once remarked to reporters in early 1971, the year when his re-election campaign was being planned: "When I am the

candidate, I run the campaign."

That tantalizing quotation has been dredged up lately and will likely be explored further in the political gossip, no matter how convincing Mr. Nixon's actions seem to the general public.

In the past two weeks, his behavior had followed the familiar pattern of past crises, at least according to what little is known of it. He drew back to himself in isolation, consulted a very few close and long-trusted associates, then sweated out his decision in singular privacy.

This past weekend was spent at the presidential retreat, Camp David, where he was accompanied by his personal secretary, Rose Mary Woods, and a speech writer, Raymond K. Price. Others—including the men who were about to make their exit—visited briefly. The President however, drafted his remarks himself.

One of the men he turned to for counsel last weekend was Secretary of State William P. Rogers, a friend and lawyer who has been a trusted sounding board in several other great personal trials of the Nixon career. Rogers was chief counsel for the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee in 1948 when Nixon, a young congressman from California, asked his advise on whether to pursue

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the Alger Hiss case, a case of Communists in government which eventually catapulted Nixon to national prominence. Rogers encouraged him to push on in the exposure.

Rogers was also close-by in 1952 when Nixon, as Gen. Dwight Eisenhower's running-mate on the Republican national ticket, was accused of maintaining a secret slush fund, financed by millionaire contributors. As the political steam gathered behind the charges, the GOP vice presidential candidate asked Rogers what his public reaction should be.

"Let them shoot their way first, then give it to them," Rogers responded, a strategy which might also have been applied to the Watergate crisis.

In the 1952 campaign, the tempest over his private fund was a six-day sensation which developed with such fury that Nixon was momentarily stunned. The Democratic innuendo was that Nixon was "selling" his performance as senator to private fat-cats. The fund, used for political expenses, only involved \$18,000 and Nixon dismissed it as a "left-wing smear" until Gen. Eisenhower himself and his top advisers expressed concern. The Republican ticket, Ike said, must be "clean as a hound's tooth."

Like other crucial moments in his career, the episode involved Nixon's belief that certain newspapers were trying to do him in politically. In his book, he noted that The Washington Post and the now-defunct New York Herald-Tribune simultaneously called for his resignation from the GOP ticket.

"I could shrug off a demand for my resignation by a paper like The Washington Post," Mr. Nixon explained then. "The Post has been consistently critical of

me since the days of the Hiss case and had taken a dim view of my nomination. But the New York Herald-Tribune was something else again. It was the most influential Republican newspaper in the East."

Campaigning in the West, he was confronted by jeering crowds. In Portland, Ore., they threw pennies at him. The top men of the Eisenhower campaign ordered him to resign, but instead Nixon saved his place on the ticket with his famous television plea of Sept. 23, 1952, one of the most dramatic half-hours in political history.

It was an emotional defense of his private finances, his wife Pat's "respectable Republican cloth coat," and even "Checkers," a cocker spaniel that someone had given his children after his nomination.

"And you know, the kids, like all kids, loved the dog and I just want to say this, right now, that regardless of what they say about it, we are going to keep it," Mr. Nixon said.

His broadcast was cut off while he was still delivering a passionate ad-lib plea for Ike. "Remember, folks, Eisenhower is a great man, believe me, he is a great man. . ."

The response from across the nation was overwhelming support and Ike em-

braced his young running-mate, who was moved to public weeping by the emotional tension.

In the great crises of his presidential tenure, Mr. Nixon has stressed his own self-control as the important element. In an interview last winter with Saul Pett of the Associated Press, the President spoke of his own private conduct during the Cambodia affair of 1971 and last year's public outburst over the bombing and mining of North Vietnam:

"People probably think the President was jumping up and down, barking orders, at those times. Actually, I have a reputation for being the coolest person in the room. In a way, I am—I have trained myself to be

that. The great decisions in this office require calm."

In recent weeks, as the bad headlines grew bigger and blacker, as more Republicans called for a White House cleansing, Mr. Nixon kept his own counsel. His spokesmen refused to comment on practically every question.

Perhaps that was the hardest time for him personally, no matter what follows now. In his book, he concluded that it is the "period of indecision" which is the most painful.

"Going through the necessary soul-searching of deciding whether to fight a battle or to run away from it," Mr. Nixon wrote, "is far more difficult than the battle itself."