

ART HOPPE



On the Death of Kings

ALL WEEK LONG, the flickering figures on the television screen debated the guilt or innocence of Richard M. Nixon, President of the United States of America.

All week long, 38 representatives of us, the people — lawyers from places like Antioch, Beaumont, Lake Bluff and Tuscaloosa — sat in judgment on one of the three most powerful men on earth.

How calm they were. How rational. How polite. ("I will gladly yield two minutes to my good friend, the gentleman from . . .") How desperately they strove to maintain an aura of decency, judiciousness and fairness. How well they succeeded.

What a triumph for our democratic process. How heartened I was that these, the representatives of us, the common people, were still more powerful than the most powerful man in our country, a man who could blow up the world with a jab of his finger. How stirring that was.

And yet . . .

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"DID YOU HEAR? They voted 28 to 10! Oh, they're really going to get the rotten son of a . . ." She was a mild-mannered woman, but she was a Nixon hater.

You could see the hatred in her eyes, the relish, the gloating. It was not a pleasant thing to see.

Now, when I returned to the television set, it was with a slight sense of unease. My representatives were as calm and polite as before as they piled on more and more evidence. ("And then on March 21, in that conversation with Dean . . .")

But the evidence seemed more circumstantial. And my representatives seemed to be stretching it to the utmost, searching desperately for any nit to pick. Outwardly, they remained cool and composed. But in the shadows behind them stood the legion of Nixon haters. They, too, were represented there.

And my thoughts turned from the triumphs of democracy to the death of kings.

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FOR WE HAVE embarked now on a course to kill the king. From the evidence, he is a man so suspicious as to bug himself, so foolish as to record for posterity his own connivings and gutter language; a vengeful man, jealous of his powers.

And yet I, couldn't help but wonder if this man had done anything that other kings and powerful presidents wouldn't have done.

Perhaps, as the Nixon haters feel, this suspicious, foolish, vengeful, jealous man deserves what he is getting. Perhaps this boil must be lanced. But as I watched, I felt sullied by its excretions; guilt-twined to be part of the Nixon-hating, circus-loving mob; and ill at ease to be in on the killing of a king.

For the killing of a king is a momentous event. "The heavens themselves blaze forth the deaths of princes." The blood-lusting mob is jubilant as the head falls. But there is an undercurrent of abhorrence at shredding the fabric of history.

Perhaps we would feel better if the boil were lanced. Perhaps our democracy would be strengthened by the weakening of the presidency's awesome power. Perhaps his successor would provide us the unity and calm we seek.

There is no turning back now. If we do decide to kill this king, I would hope we could do so with true decency, fairness and judiciousness — even with compassion. And yet . . .

Sometimes now, I fear I hear the silent padding of a lion in the streets.