

Charles McCabe

Himself

'Melancholy Tranquility'

WHEN MR. NIXON last week released the Watergate tapes which finally cooked his goose, Senator John G. Tower of Texas was moved to quote from the poetry of Greek tragedy:

"And now a wave of melancholy tranquility settled over Thebes," he said.

If these eloquent words described the situation before the doomed President resigned, they seem even more apposite to describe the mood of the country after Thursday's night resignation.

In his farewell speech Mr. Nixon was a man subdued by events of huge gravity. The strongest man on earth was being brought down by the essence of Greek tragedy: hubris, that wanton insolence or arrogance resulting from excessive pride or from passion.

To witness such a thing acted out, we are told, results in a purgation of spirit. I cannot say I was so affected. A dull depression merely entered my soul which persists as I write these words.

In a way, his farewell was Mr. Nixon's finest hour. His tenacity was still there, and he seemed physically unravaged by an ordeal which would have broken most men.

He said all the right things: but, as ever, it was difficult to believe him. At no point did he admit any guilt to the offenses which brought him dishonor and cost him the support of most of his Republican supporters in Congress.



★ ★ ★
AS ALWAYS, the President's troubles came from elsewhere. Some wicked cabal caused him to resign. In this case it was the United States Congress. As I listened to him a headline formed in my head: NIXON CHARGES HOUNDED FROM OFFICE BY CONGRESS.

The President attributed his problems simply to the fact that he "no longer had a political base" and therefore stepped down "for the good of the country." In fact they were caused by a prolonged and unforgivable campaign of deception against just about everybody in the country, his lawyers included. Mr. Nixon had lied himself out of office, and that will be the verdict of history.

★ ★ ★
AND NOW the period of "melancholy tranquility" sets in. We are all going to have to get used to one Gerald Ford. We know the cruel jibes of Lyndon Johnson about the man's intelligence.

These I for one choose to take with a grain of salt. I think a man who can graduate from Yale Law School must possess more than average intelligence.

If the new President has a weakness it is that he is the archetypal honest congressman. He has for so long been weighing the claims of opposing constituencies, and resolving them so as to hurt each least, that he has acquired a blandness which amounts to lack of conviction.

It is difficult to see in Mr. Ford's legislative history any coherent strain other than: what was good for the Dutch Reform folk in Grand Rapids, was good for the country. He likes things to be the way they were the day before yesterday. This is pallid equipment for leading a country out of the problems that face the United States, 1974.

★ ★ ★
AGAINST these things, and several others, we must place the fact that we can trust the man. The air around the White House has been cleaned as by a stinging rain. It may be symbolic that one of his first acts even before being sworn in as President was to name a successor to that dreadful house liar, Mr. Ron Ziegler.

Mr. Ford became Vice President and hence President, because Mr. Nixon at the time desperately needed an honest man around him, if only for cosmetic purposes. But of this irony, we have a man we can live with, morally.

Honesty isn't everything; but it's a hell of a fine start after the practiced contempt of Mr. Nixon. If ever a man deserved a willing suspension of disbelief, it is Mr. Ford. And our prayers, too.