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To Nixon People

By William Safire

ESSAY

WASHINGTON—Not so long ago, about four out of ten adults in this country referred to themselves politically as "Nixon people." How should they react to the forced resignation of the man who for so long embodied their beliefs and their prejudices?

As a card-carrying member of that group, let me suggest a few reactions both to those who made it to the lifeboats and those who went down with the ship:

First, toward Richard Nixon. Despite the frequent hypocrisy of some of his pursuers he was not unfairly ejected.

He is now America's only living former President, for good reasons. When he first learned that some men acting in his name committed a crime, he put the bonds of friendship ahead of his oath of office. When he had the chance to destroy all the tapes just after their existence had become known, he made the wrong tactical decision, and nobody is patting him on the back now for his rectitude in not destroying the evidence that proved him guilty.

In retrospect, all the maneuvers his supporters considered so ill-advised in establishing his innocence gain an intelligent pattern when viewed as a means toward preventing revelation of his guilt. He "knew"; he knew that there was proof that he "knew"; and all his actions for the last year, from the firing of Archibald Cox to the rejection of subpoenas to the falsely based appeal to the Supreme Court, were absolutely consistent.

No wonder, then, he would allow no lawyer to listen to the tapes; he was stalling for time and playing for breaks, and on such a course there was nobody he could trust without making him a co-conspirator. Mr. Nixon was never indecisive, never floundering, as so many of us had anguished: his plan was to protect the tapes at all costs, and their cost was all.

Therefore, no torment of unfairness is due him from the "Nixon people." Black Sox slugger "Shoeless" Joe Jackson was approached by a fan crying "Say it ain't so, Joe." The corrupted ballplayer said nothing; Mr. Nixon said it was not so.

As we spare him our tears, we can afford him more than a little respect. He was never the would-be dictator his severest critics have claimed, and his motives were either noble (to make a peace that would last) or at least not ignoble (to gain the adula-

tion that would flow from being the man who made the peace).

The people who supported him, and most of those who worked for him, can look around now that the shelling has ceased and point out much of substance that was done domestically in reflecting the will of the people—which, lest we forget, earned such a ringing affirmation of support just a year and a half ago.

Toward President Ford, the reaction of the "Nixon people" should be far different from the reaction, say, of the Kennedy people to the ascension of President Johnson. Here is no cultural or stylistic usurper; Mr. Ford was not Mr. Nixon's necessary compromise, but his chosen heir, deserving of a transfer of old loyalties. (Mr. Nixon wound up with a lifetime batting average of .500 in picking Vice Presidents, better than F.D.R.'s .333.)

As President, Mr. Ford has chosen two of the best of the early Nixon supporters to be on his transition committee: Interior Secretary Rogers Morton and NATO Ambassador Donald Rumsfeld, both of whom bear the scars of battle with the Nixon Palace Guard. Mr. Rumsfeld, a former Congressman in his early forties, is especially valuable.

Finally, how should the former "Nixon people" view the ecstatic political opposition, so wrong about the country in 1972 and so right about Mr. Nixon in 1973? For the country's sake and our own, let us let them have their time of vindication without resentment. The triumph of justice is nobody's political defeat. Churchill's "in defeat, defiance" does not apply, because Mr. Nixon's defeat is not the defeat of the "Nixon people" nor of the causes the former President espoused, only the defeat of that misguided toughness which is a form of weakness.

Of course, "in victory, magnanimity" does apply; if in months to come, those who justly brought Mr. Nixon down want to make a martyr out of him, dragging him down Pennsylvania Avenue behind a chariot, here we go again on another round of vindictiveness.

For Mr. Nixon, who might not have shown enough contrition to satisfy everyone, in delivering his own epitaph as President showed that the underlying lesson of Watergate had finally sunk in: ". . . those who hate you don't win unless you hate them—and then you destroy yourself."

Anthony Lewis is on vacation.