

NEWS & OPINION

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THE END OF THE ROAD

How History Will View 'The Candidate'

Americans are always moving on, It's an old Spanish custom gone astray.

—Stephen Vincent Benét

Richard M. Nixon, who corrupted and degraded American public life for more than a quarter century, is gone.

For him, it is over. To us there remains a foreshadowing glimpse of bleak and crippling possibilities. In historical memory Richard Nixon will not be "up the President," "the man of peace" or even "The Conspirator." He will be "The Candidate," the man for whom the pursuit of office, the panoply of power and not power itself, was the object of his startling endurance. Success can be achieved, and an office can be won, but the urge to pursue power—to win or lose—is a limitless addiction which, taken to the presidency, there being nothing more to win, could only be fulfilled by defeat.

He first entered the national awareness as a designer of a vicious and lying campaign for a seat in Congress. He succeeded because then, as later, he was superbly attuned to public fears. In two decades of public life—until he became president—his growing fame was based solely on his combat with adversaries and accusations: Jerry Voorhis, Helen

Gahagan Douglas, Alger Hiss, the Checkers speech, the Hughes Tool loan, Khrushchev in the kitchen. He constructed no monuments of service to the public welfare; no important legislation, no leadership for the great causes and controversies of the time. While fellow Republicans like Vandenberg and Taft engaged in hazardous battles of conviction, he scurried to and fro across the public stage seeking the spot where he might be safest from the changeable temper of the audience and yet still steal a scene or two.

The conservatives who supported him were to discover, along with the rest of us, that he was no more a conservative than he was a liberal. He said those things and sought that identification necessary to his electoral victories and, especially, to his nomination by a Republican party whose convention is always more conservative than its national constituency. (As the Democratic convention is more liberal than those who vote for Democrats.) Yet it trivializes his character to think him a mere opportunist, willing to adapt means to ends. His only measure of achievement—his ultimate value, conviction and moral standard all in one—was personal success. That success could not be measured as most of us could measure

it. Lacking any objective external to himself, he could only take satisfaction in achievement, only know that he had achieved through the presence of defeated enemies, by a triumph over hostile men or forces. Indeed, men, interests and beliefs were the same thing to a mind which saw public life as a battlefield on which all participants were—as he was—engaged in personal combat. He could not conceive of a link between his fortunes and historical events or changing political conditions; these were only the raw materials from which he shaped his weapons. As victory was confirmation, defeat was more than defeat; it was annihilation, a casting out. What distinguishes him from others whose minds are similarly afflicted was the incredible power of his obsession, a rare will to return, to live, which, had the combat been real or the goal more worthy, would be known as courage.

Within this insane structure of belief, there could be no distinction between ends and means, goals and the methods used to achieve them. It was cowardice to shrink from any act which might contribute to victory. The readiness to violate restraints, which bound other men, to transgress the accepted code of moral and political conduct, was evi-

dence of inner strength and daring. Weakness was the only wrong.

It was, more than anything else, a public intuition of these qualities—manifested as a generalized distrust or uneasiness—which kept Richard Nixon from office for most of the Sixties. He entered the campaign of 1968 without having won an election on his own in almost 20 years. But he was skilled beyond any competitor in the intricacies of Republican nominating politics, whose men, interest and relationships he had singlemindedly labored with through a generation to understand and master. It is easier to conceal undesirable qualities of character from small numbers than from the general public. The impressions of personal contact displaced judgments derived from public conduct, especially among those party hierarchs who view the candidate through their own ambitions and political vanities.

He was incapable of blaming the years of failure on historical conditions, events or personal inadequacy. He had been undone by enemies—not only opposing groups and individuals, but the people themselves. Unlike Lyndon Johnson he did not want love or admiration, only assistance and votes. One can only conjecture at the extent

of accumulated hatred and contempt toward the public whose support he sought. Since this hostility was inexpressible even to inward thought, it was displaced toward all those who could be thought responsible for mobilizing the public against him: news media, liberals, intellectuals, Kennedys, Jews, artists, demonstrators. But he did not like or respect any of us. How could he? He fought alone in a treacherous world of shifting alliances.

By 1968 the war in Vietnam and its corrupting consequences, including the disruption — since become permanent — of the Democratic party, made a Republican victory almost inevitable. Nelson Rockefeller would have won in a landslide. Yet even these favoring circumstances were barely enough to overcome a slowly reviving public apprehension which stripped millions of votes from Nixon in the last weeks.

It was a mistake, although one natural to decent and rational men, to think that he would change or act differently in the presidency. How could he become something different from what he was? He did not want to be president but to win the presidency. From infancy on, every person must find ways to confirm his own worth and existence: through a mother's smile, one's parents, and later through work and love. Richard Nixon's confirmation came from pursuit and conflict themselves, whose goal, once achieved, was only a token of victory and a new vantage, a changed array of forces, for the ceaseless struggle. In this moral and irretrievable scene he could never be president, only the candidate.

When he became president he had no choice but to do as he had always done. He peopled his world with enemies: Daniel Ellsberg, "leakers," Larry O'Brien, the news media and individual journalists. He conceived a more intense hostility toward such men and institutions than for his actual political opponents—Edmund Muskie or George McGovern. For he understood what candidates wanted, but the others could have no purpose except to undo him. There was nothing new in all this, except that he now commanded the power of the state along with the extra governmental resources made accessible by his position and access to great wealth: among them a private squad of agents, police and burglars.

There is every reason to think that he saw nothing seriously wrong in his conduct; that he now believes himself the victim of that vindictive conspiracy against which he struggled so long and so valiantly; that he has not been caught in wrongdoing or found guilty, but only defeated. For him government was simply the continuation of politics by other means. Yet the distinction is immense; it is the distance between unscrupulousness and evil. For the president—the repository of executive power—to transgress the law, the institutional arrangements and the assumptions of conduct which make it possible for freedom to coexist with social order is despotism, as that term has been understood since the time of ancient Greece. Acts which in others would be crimes or immoral conduct are, when committed by the head of state, dangerous evils, a violation not of individual rights but of society itself. Although we have had bad presidents, he was our first evil one.

"Despotism" and "evil" may seem like grandiose and overblown terms to apply to a person such as Richard Nixon. But the history of our century,

along with the microcosmic lessons of personal experience, demonstrate that there is as much to fear from the weak and the obsessive as from the strong and purposeful.

Once we accept Richard Nixon's world—a battlefield on which forces were arrayed for the sole purpose of determining his personal destiny—all the acts of his administration fall into place. The hostile or potentially dangerous were to be coerced or intimidated into neutrality, or if possible, into alliance: e.g., television networks or liberal businessmen. Those who could not be influenced should be punished: e.g., the State of Massachusetts or Larry O'Brien. Still others were aggrandized by contracts, grants, special favors, exemption from law enforcement—milk producers, Teamsters, Pepsi-Cola. Let no one be so naïve as

ing his opposition. Still, every moment of his public life he instinctively sought support for his own struggles by naming and attacking the enemies of the people. There are, for example, few parallels to the violent rhetoric of the 1970 "law and order" campaign. "Undesirable elements," criminals, peace demonstrators, "radliclib" should not only be punished, but severed from the society, cast out. It was the language of fascism. But the deception was too transparent, the exaggerations too grotesque. The experience of Vietnam had increased the sophistication of a public grown weary of domestic tumult. There was no way to transform Daniel Ellsberg into Alger Hiss. Had Nixon taken office a few years earlier, when passions were strong, he might have been able to stimulate enough fear and anger to make him invulnerable.

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to think Richard Nixon was rewarding his friends. For he knew that in war there are no friends, only allies, bound by mutual self-interest. He was securing alliances by linking the interest of others to his own. As he reminded us, President Nixon had no friends.

I do not wish to dispute what others have called the "achievements" of the Nixon administration. Such argument only obscures a reality so beyond denial as to be a truism: He failed to expand the opportunity, advance the welfare or enlarge the liberties of the whole people or of any significant group. He leaves behind a nation whose moral and material well-being is diminished in every important respect from what it was when he took office.

This is not wholly his responsibility. Had he taken office in friendlier times he might have been more successful and more dangerous. Our current self-congratulations should be tempered by the awareness that Richard Nixon was not driven from office by an aroused people bent on reclaiming its liberties and exterminating corruption. He was toppled because his conduct and policies threatened injury to important centers of political and economic power. They turned against him, not, as he thought, to destroy him, but to protect themselves.

Even so he might have survived, even flourished, if the war which made him president had not also reduced vulnerability to that irrational fear which was Nixon's most natural and effective instrument. Students of the mind tell us that one attribute of the creative genius is the ability to transmute neurotic conflicts into the substance of art or thought. The individual grapples with his own difficulties through forms which influence the concerns and feelings of others. Richard Nixon was most brilliant and successful when he could make others share his inner vision of dangerous conflict, project his own world of allies and enemies into the theater of public life. He rose to prominence as the country's champion against spies and communists, traitors and the unwitting accomplices of treason. He was enfeebled and confused when, in 1960, he was forced to run as the heir and defender of the Eisenhower administration. And in 1968 he vacillated between his natural inclinations and the knowledge that the peace movement was disrupting and weaken-

Now Richard Nixon is gone. He will not come again to trouble the Republic. But his spirit survives, the unquenchable temptation to corruption and tyranny. What we have witnessed was not a morality play, but a warning, perhaps a preview. The dislike of ambiguity and the desire for improving instruction, which are natural to Americans, have spawned a hundred inquiries into the "lesson of Watergate." And Watergate has much to tell us: A president is not invulnerable; abuses of power can be punished; high office is not an exemption from the criminal law; the traditions of Constitutional democracy are still strong. But Watergate's most urgent lesson is to demonstrate how fragile the protections of our freedom have become.

For six years a continual corruption and abuse of power went unchallenged. Offenses which became public knowledge—the wheat deal, ITT—went unpunished. The news media was intimidated; television commentary reflected the network's fear of executive wrath and power. The content of almost every major newspaper was influenced to some extent by the unremitting pressures of the administration. In varying degrees the agencies of law enforcement proved vulnerable to the personal and political objectives of the White House. Foreign policy, even the use of military force, was decided upon in contemptuous disregard for the traditional rights and legal powers of Congress or the people. Those who received special privileges, tax breaks, favorable rulings or exemptions from regulation and law have retained their rewards. Milk prices stay up and grain traders keep their profits. ITT still owns its insurance company and Pepsi-Cola still has an exclusive contract with the Soviet Union.

Freedom is not an individual condition, a thing, like wealth or physical strength. I am not free if I am allowed to speak my mind, only if no one has the authority to prevent me. A free society is one in which the power to diminish freedom does not exist. The American project, the theme and purpose of our entire history, has been to devise a social structure that would prevent man's natural inclinations toward corruption and prideful self-aggrandizement from destroying the democratic experiment. An analogous effort, and its subsequent failure, is de-

scribed in the Book of Genesis. The transgression of Richard Nixon against the autonomy and integrity of institutions, the rule of law, the right of privacy, the prerogatives of Congress and public were an attack on indispensable elements of that social process which, at least until now, has stifled the possibility of tyranny. His presidency was a failure. But he has successfully demonstrated that the monstrous and tumescent organs of the modern state have, silently and without debate, almost as a natural necessity, spawned a public force able to override those protections of law and custom which, on close examination, are seen to constitute freedom itself.

He did not, alone, create this authority, but he used it, and, in doing so, made us all aware of its existence. It is grotesque to balance his crimes against his "achievements," most of which in any case were vivid public confirmations of changed historical realities, further evidence of his superb gift for popular drama. Indeed when time has drained the labels of "detente" and "peaceful relations" of their seductive persuasion, it will become clearer that, in the last six years, we have embarked upon the first large-scale arms race of the postwar period—a contest without rational boundaries—and have helped to stimulate the metastasis of military power to other parts of the globe. Yet even if Nixon's achievements were undeniable, they would be irrelevant. The purpose of a free society is not achievement—of income, strength, or even peace. The purpose of achievement is a free society. One does not excuse a man for hacking at the roots in order to preserve the limbs.

A few nights ago I heard President Ford give his message to Congress. The man seemed honorable; his speech lacked menace. Much of what he said was ancient Republican orthodoxy, but some of his statements would have been inconceivable only a few years ago. Congress applauded gratefully when he promised not to wiretap or bug illegally, to respect the privacy of the citizen and the freedom of the press, to cooperate with the Congress in the conduct of the nation. Behind those statements must be the unspoken premise that it might be otherwise—that a president might violate individual rights, impair press freedom, ignore the Congress. Watergate has made us aware of those silent implications, taught us that they are real.

It is a blessing once again to have a moral president mindful of the public good. But it is too late for that. The beast is loose. To rely on the good qualities of a president is to accept an ultimate impotence in the inevitability of despotism. It is necessary now, as it was 200 years ago, to recreate the social process so that we need not fear the ambitious and the evil. It is a Herculean task, involving large changes in law and institutional relationships. And even this will be inadequate unless we possess, as a people, a shared understanding and common acceptance of the moral and civic assumptions which are to govern the conduct of social life. When history or decay dissolves this authority, no laws, no courts and no constitution can obstruct the entry of tyranny. Finally, therefore, Richard Nixon, whose tortured mind was haunted by the fear of the uncontrollable, was himself an agent of disillusion. Trapped in an unimaginable solitude, he infected the lives of an entire nation.

—Richard N. Goodwin