

# Weeping With Nixon, Up and Down

## OBSERVER

By Russell Baker

Although Jesus wept, American politicians do not. When one of them violates the protocol, the event is so extraordinary that newspapers report it on front pages and television records it with the gravity due mysterious fireballs in the sky and diabolism in City Hall.

Thus, John Ehrlichman's tears on the witness stand in Washington were treated as a major national occurrence this week and will probably be remembered by the multitude long after other details of the Watergate trial have been lost.

Although other public men may have wept publicly over the past twenty-five years, I can remember only two. Both of them, curiously or not, were associated with the career of Richard Nixon, which gives Mr. Nixon a monopoly on political tears in the modern age.

The first, of course, was Mr. Nixon, who wept publicly on the shoulder of the late Senator William Knowland in 1952. There had been the slush-fund scandal in the middle of the Eisenhower campaign. Mr. Nixon, under orders from the general to prove himself "clean as a hound's tooth," had delivered the Checkers speech which brought millions in the television audience close to tears, and the general had pronounced him "my boy."

On hearing the news, Mr. Nixon fell against Senator Knowland's lapel and wept. There are pictures of it. His old

acting coach at Whittier College, upon seeing them, is said to have boasted, "I taught him how to do that."

The next public weep was Senator Edmund Muskie's, executed outside the plant of the Manchester Union-Leader during the New Hampshire primary of 1972.

As with the post-Checkers crying, the Muskie tears also represented political progress for Mr. Nixon, for it was widely assumed that the voters would never tolerate a Presidential candidate who had tears to shed and that Senator Muskie had, therefore, cried himself out of the Democratic nomination.

This proved correct. Mr. Muskie, who had been running ahead of Mr. Nixon in the popularity polls at the end of 1971, faded like an old print by springtime, leaving Mr. Nixon to feed upon the luckless George McGovern.

There is a small irony in Mr. Ehrlichman's tears, for the Watergate confidence game in which he is involved was a part of the political dirty-tricks operations which drove Senator Muskie to destruction-by-tears in New Hampshire. The mechanics by which the White House unloosed the Muskie tear ducts seem to have been masterminded by Charles Colson, but we may reasonably assume that Mr. Ehrlichman smiled as happily as his fellow White House pranksters upon learning that the fatal tears had flowed in the New England snow.

Did Senator Muskie smile privately this week at the news of Mr. Ehrlichman's tears? He would surely not admit to it, but he would be less than human if he did not take satisfaction

from the mild Biblical justice of extracting a tear for a tear.

The more troublesome question is why the occasional shedding of tears by public men is such an astonishing event that it commands headlines and destroys careers? If Jesus could weep, why not Muskie?

The aggressive American temperament would naturally be uneasy with leaders who governed on floods of tears, but an occasional cry would seem to suggest a becoming sensitivity in a man, which ought to make him more attractive, not less so, for the brutish work of the Presidency.

One of the most skilled public weepers of the modern age was Winston Churchill, an American idol. I once saw the old man weep ostentatiously in the House of Commons during a speech describing the devastation humanity would suffer in a nuclear war, and the House was almost reverential in its silence before the spectacle.

An English politician to whom I described this remarkable and un-American performance replied, "Oh, Winston does that crying business every time he talks about the bomb. He can turn it on and off."

Somewhere in England, I suppose, there was an old drama coach who said, "I taught him how to do that," but it doesn't matter. For Churchill, the ability to shed a few tears on a large occasion was a manly attribute. Small boys are taught that boys don't cry, but tears on a big occasion are entirely fitting for a big man.

Perhaps Americans prefer to be led by big boys.