

Morality Play *NYT 12/30/74*

As the Watergate trial neared its end last week, the closing statements by defendants' counsel inspired an overwhelming feeling of anticlimax and weariness. Like all the earlier presentations, questions and cross-examinations throughout the sixty-day trial in United States District Court in Washington, these final arguments fell under the shadow of the unprecedented playback of so much evidence—in the defendants' own voices—recorded on the White House tapes. The proceedings concluded as they began—with Richard Nixon's physical absence rendered less remarkable than his ghostlike presence by virtue of his own voice.

It was thus quite natural for defense attorney William Frates, who in his opening statement had charged that "Richard Nixon deceived, misled, lied to and used John Ehrlichman," to end his efforts by describing his client as a "loyal servant" who had been "thrown to the wolves" by a willful master. One last time, the omnipotence of the Commander in Chief was conjured up; but this time the familiar image was recreated not with the swagger of old White House days, but in the hope that memories of the fallen leader's power might now serve to soak up, like a convenient sponge, the transgressions of his former palace guard.

While it was clear from the outset that Richard Nixon, though safely pardoned, was nevertheless on trial in absentia, it does not follow that to prove him guilty was tantamount to absolving all others. The power wielded by the Nixon White House was the power of an oligarchy. The isolated and unresponsive Oval Office was the creation of a coterie whose ways and values emerged with devastating clarity from the Mafia-like huddles recorded on the tapes.

Whatever "truth" Judge John Sirica sought, the trial has surely shown the truth contained in warnings that the chief executive of a republic must never be endowed with "inherent" rights and privileges once claimed by monarchs. In 1972, at the peak of his own influence, Mr. Ehrlichman thus described with approval what was expected from Mr. Nixon's subordinates: "When he says, 'Jump,' they only ask 'How high?'" And H.R. Haldeman answered a proposal by an aide below his own rank: "Your job is to do, not to think."

The trial explained the character of men who, from the security of their powerful circle, joined their master in defying Congress, lying to the people and ignoring the Constitution and the laws.

It is for the jury now, to determine the defendants' innocence or guilt in the more limited context of the trial. But regardless of the verdict, the drama acted out in Judge Sirica's court has already made the American people privy to a morality play about freedom and power—and about a narrow escape that gives new pertinence to Jefferson's warning about "the price of liberty."