

The first victim

As Jerry Voorhis waited with the rest of the world the other night to hear Richard Nixon resign, he said quickly, "I'm going to be quite relieved when he is no longer President of the United States."

A lot of might-have-beens went into that remark, for Jerry Voorhis was Nixon's first political victim, way back at the beginning of the trail.

Twenty-eight years ago Voorhis was an energetic congressman respected on both sides of the aisle. But when he came up for re-election, Nixon, an unknown Navy veteran, tore into him with a campaign that has become a textbook classic of dirty politics and the Big Lie technique.

It was the first of the "soft on Communism" smears, which Nixon used later against Helen Gahagan Douglas, Dean Acheson, Adlai Stevenson, Harry Truman and virtually anyone else who stood in his way.

Voorhis, unprepared for such tactics, went down to defeat and political obscurity. Now 73, he lives in a retirement home near San Clemente, and from that perspective he followed Nixon's last hours in office.

"Revenge? Nope. I do feel some vindication. But I don't feel any exhilaration. Considering the problems of the country, a guy would have to be pretty small if he did," he said.

His reaction to the downfall of the President focused on the present, not the past.

"My defeat was of comparatively little importance, except that it did launch his career," he said. "But the putting together of a completely corrupt administration didn't happen in 1946. Nor was he then in a position virtually to sell the government to the highest bidder. These are the serious things, and they came much later."

Just before Watergate, Voorhis published a book, "The Strange Case of Richard Milhous Nixon," in which he analyzed the Nixon political technique:

"There was one assumption that never for a moment was questioned — the assumption that anyone opposed to Richard Nixon, representing as he did all that was pure and holy in free enterprise Americanism, must be in some manner or another subversive. How could there be any other explanation of why anyone would oppose him?"

"And having reached this assumption Mr. Nixon and his followers felt justified in using any methods and tactics that might seem necessary to defeat his 'subversive' opponents."

The Nixon style was to attack, attack, attack, Voorhis said. "And when your opponent tries to defend himself against untrue or distorted charges, learn to whimper. Above all, learn to whimper and accuse him of using unfair political tactics by calling you a liar," he added.

"His only thought was to win at all costs, win no matter what you have to do. And that has continued all the way through."

In his pre-Watergate book, Voorhis warned that the Nixon mentality, and the complacency of a "silent majority" could turn America into a garrison state. He ended on a discouraged note:

"The question is whether people care — whether enough people care enough — to stop the process before it's too late."

But as Voorhis waited for the President to resign, his spirits lifted.

"The main thing is that this demonstrates the institutions of the nation are stronger than any willful individual, even if he's the President," he said, "even if he surrounds himself with a clever bunch of people who are willing to do anything to advance his power."

"I think the people have a right to feel their Constitution has stood the greatest test it has ever faced, at least since the Civil War, and the nation has come out strong and clean."