

Washington

The Farewell by Nixon: A Tragic Story

By JAMES RESTON

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There is an element of tragedy in Richard Nixon's farewell. Two years ago he was within 100,000 votes of the American Presidency and today, unelected and unmourned, he is an unemployed lawyer in Los Angeles. No wonder he slammed the door as he went out.

The British do it better. They find a "safe seat" in Parliament for the defeated leader of a party, and, being sensitive to human frailty, pass him along in later years to the dignity of the House of Lords.

Our politics are more savage. The gap between victory and defeat is almost too wide. The winner gets more than he can handle and the loser more than he can bear. We put them in the White House before they are ready and retire them before they are ripe.

It was this system that produced Nixon in the beginning and destroyed him in the end. He came to power too early and retired too soon. He mastered the techniques of politics before he mastered the principles, and ironically, it was this preoccupation with techniques that both brought him forward and cast him down.

Morals and Politics

Dick Nixon got into national politics by using his bad qualities rather than his good qualities—of which he has many—against Jerry Voorhees and Helen Gahagan Douglas, and he reached almost to the pinnacle of our national life at least partly by accident.

For he came along at a time when the Republicans happened to be looking for a Vice-Presidential candidate who could symbolize "youth", the growth of the West, and anti-Communism. This was what the system required in 1952 as a running mate for Eisenhower — this and Nixon's political skill to back up Ike's lack of political experience. So he was nominated and elected, and then another ironical thing happened.

Like most Americans who reach the top councils of their Government, he grew up with the job and used his good qualities in the performance of it, but the job itself dragged him back into the political arena. To Eisenhower, who didn't like political rallies until he retired, Nixon was the Vice President in charge of the party. He was the point of the Republican spear, always tilting with the opposition in the exaggerated rhetoric of the political wars, and inevitably this pugnacious and aggressive role perpetuated his reputation as the symbol of everything that is harsh and devious in American political life.

Maybe this had something to do with his defeat in 1962. More than likely it was merely his appearance: The cold eyes, the ski-jump nose, the black whiskers shining through. Yet there was something else. The American people will put an aggressive district attorney type into almost any office. But the Presidency, they seem to feel, requires that power be tempered by wisdom and even by mercy, and these were certainly not his most obvious qualities. See, also, Tom Dewey.

What was most obvious about Nixon particularly to the press, those recorders of the obvious, was his preoccupation with the machinery of politics. Everything seemed to be contrived, even the appearance of naturalness. He attacked planning but planned everything. He seemed bold and elaborately objective in public, but in private seemed less composed, even uneasy and disturbingly introspective.

This was the root of his trouble with the reporters: Not that they were refusing to report what he said but that they were insisting on reporting all the rest of the picture—not only the words but the techniques, not only the public posture but the private posture, not only the lines of the play but the elaborate stage directions.

News and Truth

No public figure of our time has ever studied the reporters so much or understood them so little. He thought the reporter should merely be a transmission belt for what he said, not of why he said it. Like the cigarette man, he insisted that "It's what's up front that counts," while the reporter, constantly haunted by the feeling that he might deceive the reader merely by reporting the carefully-rehearsed lines in the play, insisted on recording what was going on back stage.

Nixon always resented this. He never seemed to understand the difference between news and truth. To him what he said was "news" and should be left there.

Maybe he was right. It could be that the "real Nixon" was the one on stage, but that is beyond journalism now and will have to be left to the historians and the psychological novelists.