

BOOK REPORT: John Leonard reviews "Six Crises" by Richard M. Nixon, published by Doubleday, 1962.

Let me make it clear at the outset that I am not going to be objective. I am one of those people who are called "Nixon-haters"; somewhere along the line we feel that we personally have been somehow soiled by this man, and we become strident on the subject. So several of the propositions of this review are 1) that "Six Crises" establishes conclusively the contention that Richard Nixon has nothing to offer this nation but the cheap sort of second-rate sainthood he is here busy trying to manufacture; 2) that his book might more instructively have been titled "The Death of a Salesman" or "Advertisements for Myself"; and 3) that, in baring his soul, he has shown us just how empty he is inside. That, I think, is fair warning. Switch me off now if you were expecting a few pious remarks about the tragic collapse of Dick Nixon, or a long swoon of meditation on the loneliness of this misunderstood and pitiable man, or a tennis-court slap on the back for the little man who almost made it. I read and I review his book because I am fascinated by the flower of rot, and because I think that more interesting and instructive than Richard Nixon the success is Richard Nixon the failure. I think that more meaningful than the man of tricks is the man of tricks reduced to desperation.

All right. We presume that in a democracy a certain number of hucksters, knaves, cowards, thieves and assassins will, by virtue of cunning and accident of history, be elevated into high governmental posts and entrusted with responsibilities beyond their grasp. It is only a wonder that more of them don't rise higher, that there is some sort of compensatory mechanism that so often brings them down and discards them, finally, in distaste. I find most interesting in this book those portions in which Richard Nixon relates his confrontation with that compensatory mechanism, and the absence of his self-knowledge at the time of that confrontation.

In "Six Crises" Nixon triumphantly documents his inability to understand the unfolding of history around him. I refer initially to his conviction that all criticism of him is inspired by his anti-Communism. He quotes himself telling a crowd at a train-station in 1952, just after the first reports of the Nixon fund, quote: "You folks know the work that I did investigating Communists in the United States. Ever since I have done that work the Communists and the leftwingers have been fighting me with every possible smear. When I received the nomination for the Vice-Presidency I was warned that if I continued to attack the Communists in this government they would continue to smear me. And believe me, you can expect they will continue to do so. They started it yesterday." Unquote. Or take his response to the hostile mobs which greeted him in Caracas. It was to bawl out the Venezuelan foreign minister: Nixon told the unfortunate man, quote: "If your government doesn't have the guts and good sense to control a mob like the one at the airport, there will soon be no freedom for anyone in Venezuela. Freedom does not mean the right to engage in mob actions." Unquote. Or after the incident at San Marcos University, where he had been stoned: Nixon asked an aide for a rundown on the reaction to his performance, and was told that almost all reports were favorable, but that Rubottom and Bernbaum, two Foreign Service men, had, and again I quote from the Nixon account: "expressed concern that the episode had embarrassed the Peruvian government and had compromised the good-will effect of the entire tour. I blew my stack. I told Cushman to have Rubottom and Bernbaum come to my room immediately. He reported back that they were dressing for the state dinner that evening and would come when finished. I told him to have them come at once as they were. A few minutes later the two men appeared before me, half dressed. I ripped into them. I told them

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it was their right and obligation before a decision was made to advise me against the San Marcos visit. But once I had made my decision in a matter of this importance, it was incumbent upon them, as key members of my staff, to put aside their objections and to support me . . . No loyal staff member could do otherwise." Unquote. Nixon went on to disparage the Foreign Service in general for too often compromising with the Communists. "We, too," he said, "must play to win. Too often what we try to do is play not to lose. What we must do is to act like Americans and not put our tails between our legs and run every time some Communist bully tries to bluff us." Unquote. Well now, what did Rubottom and Bernbaum do to arouse such wrath? They hadn't gone to the newspapers, or filed an official report, or complained to a superior: they had merely expressed an opinion. More importantly, we see here that the reduction of international conflicts to schoolyard tough-guy neighborhood heroics--a reduction Mr. Nixon often makes in his public addresses to the American people--that such a reduction is not simply a device he employs for public use, not simply a little bit of hypocritical legerdemain, but rather an accomplished simple-mindedness he carries with him into the cud-chewing silence of his lonely thoughts. He really thinks this way. In the Soviet Union, faced by a belligerent Khrushchev who inveighed against the Captive Nations resolution just passed by Congress, Nixon notes that Khrushchev used Russian words which made even his translator blush. Says Nixon, and I quote: "It was on that 'peasant' note that my courtesy call on the leader of the world Communist movement came to an end." Unquote. The word 'peasant' is placed in quotes by Nixon, an especially devastating bit of prose stylization. These are the things that Richard Nixon notices and remarks upon: the language of Khrushchev (indeed, the language of Harry Truman), the brown chewing-tobacco spit which ruins Pat's new red dress in Caracas, the doubts of a staff member.

Does he really grasp what's going on? Ironically enough, he opens his book with this reference, I quote: "In April, I visited President Kennedy for the first time since he had taken office. When I told him I was considering the possibility of joining the 'literary' ranks [Nixon puts 'literary' in quotes, like 'peasant'], of which he himself is so distinguished a member, he expressed the thought that every public man should write a book at some time in his life, both for the mental discipline and because it tends to elevate him in popular esteem to the respected status of an 'intellectual.'" Unquote, and 'intellectual' of course is suspended dangling between another pair of quotation-marks. Now, it seems obvious that Nixon intends here to expose Kennedy's cynicism, and just as obvious, I think, that Kennedy was operating on several levels of irony at which Nixon has never even guessed. But Nixon wants desperately to be an intellectual: he takes it seriously. Theodore H. White reports that Nixon during the campaign turned to reporters with a rather desperate smile and said he was an intellectual, only nobody knew it. But this book makes it obvious that he isn't an intellectual. It is not only the banality of style: that might be expected from the predigested prose that issues from ghost-writers. It is the inability to escape from the prison of self, to consider ideas in the abstract, to free himself for even a moment from the terrible demands of a wounded ego. The man has no self-confidence. It is the network of his lacerations which Mr. Nixon here explores--not world events; and all his army of little tin structures on courage will not rescue him. Courage, anyway, is not the proud gesture, the single act, the glamorous setting-to. It is a quality of the man, a way of life, a grace and a dignity and a meaning which reside in every mood and act of a man. Nixon has dealt with six of the most important events of our post-war history only as they affected his personal fortunes, only as they raised his rating on the Gallup poll, or moved his critics to complaint.

This egoism is all-intrusive, a wall-to-wall carpeting of self it is impossible not to step on. He is obsessively sensitive to the slightest rebuke. His ego, as it emerges from the pages of this book, is a large and delicate

blooming flower of tender flesh: it must bask in continual light, it must be watered with regular praise, or it closes in upon itself, onto its inner silence, out of petulance and fear. So all reporters hate him and distort what he says; Communists and leftwingers all smear him; President Eisenhower is callous to his emotional needs; everybody is unfair. Illustrative of this insecurity is his compulsion for seizing upon praise and reporting it in his book. I list a few examples. In his introduction, he reports attending a Washington reception for Congressional Medal of Honor winners, shortly after his return from South America in 1958. Quote: "One of the guests of honor came up to me and, pointing to his ribbon, said: 'You should be wearing this, not I. I could never have done what you did in Caracas.' I answered: 'And I could never have done what you did during the Battle of the Bulge.' Perhaps we were both wrong." Unquote. On p. 118, after the Checkers speech, Nixon reports the TV make-up man who said admiringly: "That ought to fix them. There has never been a broadcast like it before." And he quotes Eisenhower, too, on p. 120: "I happen to be one of those people who, when I get into a fight, would rather have a courageous and honest man by my side than a whole box-car of pussyfooters. I have seen brave men in tough situations. I have never seen anybody come through in better fashion than Senator Nixon did tonight." On p. 149, after Eisenhower's heart attack, Foster Dulles tells Nixon: "Mr. Vice-President, I realize that you have been under a heavy burden during these past few days, and I know I express the opinion of everybody here that you have conducted yourself superbly. And I want you to know we are proud to be on this team and proud to be serving in this Cabinet under your leadership." On p. 202, after the San Marcos incident, Nixon reports Tad Szulc of the New York Times running alongside his car, shouting: "Good going, Mr. Vice-President, good going." On p. 205 Nixon's private aide Don Hughes asks: "Sir, could I say something personal? 'Sure, go ahead,' I said, still mystified. 'Sir,' he said, 'I have never been so proud to be an American as I was today. I am honored to be serving under you.'" On p. 209, still in Peru, Nixon received a telegram from Claire Booth Luce saying: "Bully." On p. 227 Munoz-Marín embraces him and says: "You were magnificent in Lima and Caracas." On p. 258, after the heroic battle with Khrushchev in the model American kitchen, a United Press reporter tells Nixon: "Good going, Mr. Vice-President," and Mikoyan himself compliments Nixon--all dully reported, all painstakingly recorded. In the last long section of the book, devoted to the 1960 campaign, there are, of course, innumerable instances of people apotheosizing Nixon. He reports every one of them.

All I can say is that I am glad such a mass of insecurity is not responsible for the conduct of our government today. Does that sound bitter? It is. Polite people in polite conversation tend to look at you as if you're telling them a dirty joke when you happen to mention these days the name of Jerry Voorhis or Helen Gahagan Douglas. Just how far have we come when Richard Nixon can write: "I had come into this 1952 campaign well-prepared, I thought, for any political smear that could be directed against me. After what my ~~xxx~~ opponents had thrown at me in my campaigns for the House and Senate . . . I thought I had been through the worst." Unquote. The worm has really turned. Take the preposterous statement that he feels he should have spent more time "on appearance and less on substance" in the 1960 Presidential campaign. This man has never been tortured by compunctions; he still isn't. And I have no use for the pity-peddlers who prowl about now dispensing sympathy for him. He deserves what he gets.

Is his book interesting? Aside from exposing this terrible flower of ego, and from demonstrating that he isn't equipped for high office, "Six Crises" isn't a terribly interesting book. It gives us some insight into Eisenhower, unwittingly. We get a sense of the man's paralyzing lack of decisiveness, his reluctance to deal with distasteful situations, his tendency, once some

sort of action was forced upon him, to choose rash and wrathful means of self-expression. Even Nixon wouldn't have been idiotic enough to dispatch two companies of Marine troops to the Caribbean when the Vice-President had his public relations problems in Caracas. Then there are all those terrible Eisenhower platitudes which Nixon quotes with such officious approval, as if they dropped like silver coins from the Old Man's mouth. Here are two examples of what Nixon refers to as Eisenhower's maxims. On p. 177 Ike says: a politician can always be counted on to have his mouth open and his mind closed, and on p. 235, Ike says: "I have always found that plans are useless, but planning is indispensable." One can imagine what life was like around the White House in those placid by-gone days.

Taking the book episode by episode, the Hiss business is most interesting (except for the 1960 campaign), only because it is of such continuing interest. We are still arguing about the typewriter. For myself, I agree with Murray Kempton, whose report on Hiss-Chambers in his book "A Part of Our Time" (Simon & Schuster) is the best around. Hiss is probably guilty; the transcript shows he continually lied. But this is both more and less than a 'tragedy of history'--it involves two atypical men, both products of the same shabby gentility that produced Nixon, the shabby gentility whose cardinal rule is: you can't be too careful. The worst thing about the Hiss case is that it convinced Richard Nixon he could rise ^{to} anti-Communism into the Presidency, and he almost did so. To say, as he does, that it cost him that office is balderdash.

But we get bogged down in the chapters devoted to the Fund speech, the heart attack, Caracas and Khrushchev. The Fund was a nasty little business, a third-rate scandal, really, and rather minor all the way around. But out of it emerged Nixon the cliché-machine, the mechanical dispensary: drop in your coins, and out gurgles a wet and sticky sentimentality, a poisonous brew concocted out of mother, America, dogdom, cloth coats, really folks and all the technicolored garbage of the boy next door. Caracas demonstrated that he doesn't understand what's going on in the world; the heart attack crisis, that he can be discreet; the trip to the Soviet Union, that he knows a good gimmick when he sees one. But it is the 1960 campaign that really tells us something, and it is there the narrative picks up again. Somewhere along the line the likes of Nixon click off and can't make it. The compensatory mechanism catches up with them, and they haven't the self-knowledge to understand what's happened. All right: Nixon didn't have a chance; he was an outsider; he didn't have time to make himself over into a man. He went too far, too fast, on accidents and cunning, and he never really became a man. He simply didn't exist; he had no style; he was only a Platonic ideal of what he would like himself to be, a cardboard image of what he thought it would take to win. That's what the American voters learned the evening of the first television debate. Substantive questions were not argued, but it was immediately clear that Kennedy had style (the style of the Irish, the style of money, the style of Harvard, and the Kennedy style); Kennedy was, as Norman Mailer has observed, a hipster. As such, he existed as a man in his own right, self-assured, with his own private grace and definition and approach. Nixon couldn't compete; he had no such existence. And in his defeat he has only fallen into that flower of bruised ego, and is capable only on this obscure apology and this moral indignation, the sort of indignation H.G. Wells called jealousy with a halo. Therefore this incredible business of Cuba, in which he took a position opposite to that which he says he believed, because Kennedy was saying what he really thought: and now Allen Dulles must strike him down by denying all. Or the humbuggery about Martin Luther King. Or the carpetbagger statement.

These are mistakes, the sort of mistakes which will insure that he lose even in California, and they are significant mistakes. America is a terrible place in which to live if you fail; it is against the law in America to fail. But Nixon failed. Like a gambler who was always lucky and always won, he was suddenly struck down when the stakes were huge, and he is now reduced to desperation, to wilder and wilder bets, to the flinging of miscellaneous coins upon the table, and the frantic prayer to the great spinning wheel, and he doesn't win. There is something pathetic about it, I will agree; but there are those of us who are unmoved by the pathos of Richard Nixon. He kicked us so often when we were down; we aren't very forgiving. It has been his triumph, the triumph of his assertion and his failure, that we respond to him upon the level on which he first insisted. We are all soiled by his saga, by how long it took the compensatory mechanism to catch up with him, by what he left behind. We all smell of his exploded ego.

-- John Leonard