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What Went Wrong? MAY 7 1971

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"A new Republican Administration will arm the American people with the truth."—Richard Nixon, 1968.

"I do not ask you to take what I say on faith."—Richard Nixon, 1971.

What went wrong? The Nixon Administration, in its pained and persistent quest for national credibility, has been a study in frustration that seems, in itself, scarcely credible. No one in Washington is more aware than President Nixon that the political life of his predecessor ended with his loss of popular credence.

No White House in American history, moreover, has been as populated as today's with veterans of the wars of public relations, all trained to polish images and powder blemishes. Why should such an array of technical talent find itself in such disarray?

The riddle challenges any student of the Presidency. Any definitive answers may be impossible, but a few clues seem clearly probable. And—strikingly—they all have to do with neither staff nor strategy, but only with the man in question.

(1) The Representation of Self. Although there is something personally appealing in the true-life picture of Mr. Nixon bending over his yellow legal pads as he drafts his own most sensitive political speeches, the result has often proved to be politically appalling. Such was the case a year ago, for example, with his address to the nation announcing the Cambodian invasion. Whatever the merits or the

follies of the venture, he could hardly have prepared a worse case for it. The President spent a long, quiet weekend at Camp David carefully framing his argument, untroubled by counsellors or criticisms.

(2) The Pretense of Candor. This has been—like an itch or a tic—something that has nagged Mr. Nixon through almost all his political life. As a politically neutral veteran of his press conferences recently remarked to me: "We have learned. As soon as he says, 'Let me make one thing perfectly clear,' all reporters reach for their gas-masks." So it seemed to go, in any case, with his latest (and eighth) report to the nation on Vietnam. The gravely avowed purpose was "to lay all the pertinent facts before you." Perhaps the most obvious and "pertinent" question in any listener's mind was: Why had South Vietnamese battalions fled from their Laos excursion—or "incursion"—more than a month earlier than the American military had wanted or expected? But this question was not even mentioned, much less answered.

(3) The Juggling of Words. Mr. Nixon has repeatedly recalled his 1968 "pledge" to end the Vietnam war—without restating exactly what he promised. In that year's New Hampshire primary, for example, he sounded quite explicit: "It is essential that we end this war, and end it quickly." And it seems very doubtful that many American voters, hearing that declaration, understood the next President really to be saying: "It is essential that we end this war . . . or most of it . . . sometime in the next four years . . . anyway, before the 1972 campaign."

(4) The Washing of Hands. All Presidents—from a Wilson and a Roosevelt to a Johnson and a Nixon—acquire a political knack for remembering or forgetting, as prudence dictates. Yet none can quite match this particular President in his fondness for the rite of self-absolution. Almost since his inauguration, he has spoken of the Vietnam war as a kind of cruel inheritance from a feckless Democratic past. In fact, of course, it was no such alien legacy: it was a conflict whose expansion and prosecution he had fervently advocated throughout the 1960's. Historically, indeed, it is his in a special way: as long ago as 1954, he urged the commitment of American ground forces to this very arena. In 1971, the point is not whether that counsel amounted to sense or nonsense. The point is that this President feels compelled to talk as if he had never voiced any call for precisely the military build-up that he now promises to break down.

All this is too bad—alike for the President and for the nation. To reverse his latest rhetoric, the Vietnam war is in the process of ending "not nobly, but meanly." It cannot be otherwise.

The 37th President should have had—as one of his counsellors on public opinion—the salty New England philosopher of the 19th century who so soundly suggested, to men and to Presidents: "Say what you have to say, not what you ought. Any truth is better than make-believe."

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