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In Dubious Battle

By Anthony Lewis

Before he became President, Richard Nixon described in "Six Crises" the struggle through which he puts himself in times of stress. At critical moments before and since, he has inadvertently given more revealing public glimpses of his private emotions. What is it that he has revealed?

"Now that all the members of the press are so delighted that I have lost . . ." so he addressed the press after losing the race for Governor of California in 1962—the occasion best known for his remark: "You won't have Nixon to kick around any more, because, gentlemen, this is my last press conference."

There were other things in that 1962 statement than the remembered comments on the press. Mr. Nixon said President Kennedy should get rid of advisers "who opposed atomic tests, who want him to admit Red China to the U.N., all of the woolly heads around him." He said of the man who had just beaten him, Edmund G. Brown:

"I believe Governor Brown has a heart, even though he believes I do not. I believe he is a good American, even though he feels I am not."

Traces of the old aggressiveness can be seen in the diversionary attack on "woolly heads," along with what has to be a kind of paranoia about the press. But the more significant theme in that 1962 press conference was something else: self-pity.

Most people feel sorry for themselves at times, and it is never an attractive trait. But even a decade later it is embarrassing to read the words of a public man that so painfully displays the hurt, the defensiveness, the resentments of self-pity.

In four and one-half years as President, Mr. Nixon has mostly maintained a public demeanor of calm and control—in part, perhaps, by being so little in public. But there have been times when he let the inner emotions show.

One notable occasion was the Cambodian "incursion" in April, 1970, with the violent public reaction it produced. After attending a Pentagon briefing, the President chatted with two officials and suddenly spoke his resentments aloud:

"You see these bums, you know, blowing up the campuses. Listen, the boys that are on the college campuses today are, the luckiest people in the world, going to the greatest universities, and there they are burning up the books, storming around about this issue. You name it. Get rid of the war, there will be another one."

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In his television speech announcing the incursion, Mr. Nixon dwelt on himself. Some thought he would be hurt politically, he said, but "I would rather be a one-term President and do what I believe was right than to be a two-term President at the cost of seeing America become a second-class power and to see this nation accept the first defeat in its proud 190-year history."

That same curious personalization appeared in other Nixon war speeches, along with the argument of American power and the need to avoid "humiliation." He said more than once that he could have blamed the war on his predecessors and pulled out, but he had chosen the harder course—as if the test of Richard Nixon were as important as the trauma of Indochina.

There was a similar strain in the rambling speech the President made to his staff when he got out of the hospital last month. He had been warned about risking his health, he said, but "the health of a man is not nearly as important as the health of the nation and the health of the world." And then, adopting the royal "we," he closed by saying: "What we were elected to do, we are going to do, and let others wallow in Watergate, we are going to do our job."

There is a kind of fantasized heroism in all this: the lonely figure fighting on for what is right despite the press, the bums, all the enemies outside, even ill health. The stilted references to himself, finally as we, make it the more striking.

Genuine heroes do not talk about their heroism, and genuine political leaders do not try to communicate in terms of their status. When Lincoln wrote to the mother of a Civil War soldier, he did not call attention to his troubles as President; he spoke as one human being to another.

But Lincoln knew what was inside himself, so he did not need the constant reassurance of outside approval and the symbols of power. That is another way of saying that he had true humility, the essential ingredient of political confidence and dignity.

It must be that Richard Nixon looks to the externals because he has no confidence in what lies within. That is a harsh thing to say, but he is President, and his character infects his Administration. The Presidency ought to have ennobled him, as it has so many others. But he remains a hollow man aware of his own hollowness.