

When Push Comes to Shove?

A Commentary

By Nicholas von Hoffman

Jive Jerry Warren, the assistant press secretary, says that President Truthful won't apologize to the Ziggy Ron because there is nothing to apologize for. But millions of us saw El Flippo on TV grab Ziegler by the arm, whirl him around and, with the expression on his face both frightening and frightful, shove him back down what appeared to be a ramp in New Orleans the other day.

Okay, then, let's make jokes. If Ziegler quits, Nixon won't have *him* to kick around any more. Or maybe Ziegler's job is to offer his backside as a substitute whenever the urge to bomb Cambodia becomes too painfully intense.

But snide and snippy remarks aside, who can forget the picture of a President so out of control of himself that he expresses it by laying angry hands on a member of his staff in public. President Truman was given to occasional acts of intemperance but nothing like this. If El Flippo had pulled that as a private citizen, he'd risk getting a retaliatory punch in the snoot.

None of this is said to condemn him. Giving Ron Ziegler a good shove is probably something that two-thirds of the White House press corps has been aching to do for years. Perhaps President Flippo did it by way of patching up his differences with the media. In any event, we should be understanding. Being President is a hard job, but being President Nixon is a crucifixion.

As an isolated act of temper we could hope it wouldn't scandalize too many school children, but coming as it does just after that strange looking man made that Watergate speech and right before his spooky stage performance for the Veterans of Foreign Wars, a lot of people are beginning to wonder what's going on. Enough people are wondering that Jive Jerry had to tell the other day that the President wasn't under medication because he doesn't need to be.

Then what gives? With his San Clemente press conference the impression is gaining that Nixon is becoming dysfunctional, and the fear is growing that he may do something we'll be sorry for. It could be that such thoughts are the malicious children of the disgust and disrespect he's covered himself with, but everything he does and all he doesn't do sets off tremors of anxiety. Is the fear of some kind of presidential coup d'etat abates, other forebodings take its place. In the fifth year of this strong activist presidency we discover a

weak, uncertain, inconsistent, reclusive man is holding down the job.

He may not have a nervous disorder, but he's going to give the country one, alternating between morbid isolation in his various White Houses and these odd leaps into the public eye made yet more disconcerting by unexplained reports of assassination plots. The peculiar comings, goings and hibernations of the President, however, are as nothing compared to the Agnew situation.

Is his crinkly-toed and qualified endorsement of his vice president another dangle, dangle slowly, slowly number? As we are unaccustomed to seeing our Presidents engage in one-sided shoving matches with their staffs, so we are not yet used to our Vice Presidents attacking our Attorneys General for "smearing" them. Viewed from the public's side of the television tube, it looks like this administration is blowing itself up, which might be a good idea if we could be sure they won't take America with them.

We have Spiro T. Eggplant reading statements to the television saying he is innocent and has nothing to hide, although he never gives us any facts or particulars about whatever it is he is suspected of being guilty of. We have a cheering section saying how much better, bolder and more honest he is than Nixon because he says he's innocent somewhat more stridently than the President says *he's* innocent. We have Melvin Laird calling up members of Congress and cautioning them not to make any public comments on the case, e.g., let 'im dangle. We have the Attorney General and his Baltimore subordinate, who's supposed to be running the case, making elliptical remarks which tell us nothing.

What's going on here? The air is full of charges that our Vice President is in fact the cheapest kind of crook, and that's all we get? Mum's the word, shush, nobody say anything, let the grand jury do its work in peace and secrecy, as though Agnew were an anonymous junkie being indicted for snitching a stereo.

This is beyond all believing. What's going to happen next? Does Elliot Richardson indict him and let him stay in office through months of a messy trial? Or does he not indict him and then just let the matter drop? Well, much ado about nothing, forget it, forget Watergate and get back to work, inflation fighters.

"... For me to talk about it would be totally inappropriate and I make no comment..." quoth President Truthful, in his shaken and shakey press conference voice, when he should have said that, indictment or not, all the evidence on Agnew would be sent to the House Judiciary Committee. It is there that impeachment proceedings must originate, and an operative, leading President would remind us that while it's the courts' duty to determine guilt or innocence, it is the Congress' to determine fitness to continue in office.

So it's us who're left dangling with the most important questions about the government's integrity unanswered. But, on the other hand, think of what El Flippo might have said.