

The Coach

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By John S. D. Eisenhower

VALLEY FORGE, Pa.—The Coach was at the peak of his career. The Institution that had summoned him to the helm a few years before was flourishing. He had been sent for largely on the basis of his previous performance as the Assistant Coach, and, since he had left, the Institution had fallen into disrepair. It had incurred defeat after defeat, and an exasperated group of followers had recalled him from civilian pursuits to lead them as their Number One man. But being Number One man—in contrast to being Number Two man—is a different ball game. On the shoulders of the Chief falls all the responsibility for success or failure. It is a lonely position, experienced by few in this world.

The Coach had experienced his difficulties for a while, and some had wondered if he was the man for the job. But he had pulled the Institution up by its bootstraps and now the sky was bright. His team had achieved a remarkable series of successes to boast; they were recognized in the country as practically invincible. And the public recognized him as the champ.

But even now at the peak of his glory forces within his team were working to undermine him and the principles he was dedicated to. Seeds of infection began to spread among the players that adored him — and whom he adored in return. These seeds stemmed not from venal motives but rather from an excess of devotion, devotion first to the Chief and second to the Institution. They spread quietly, surreptitiously, but everyone inflicted found himself trapped beyond recall. The growth was irreversible; yet the Coach's team not only neglected to inform him; they felt it their duty to keep it from him. In their hearts they felt they were, in the over-all scheme of things, right. The Coach and the Institution must be protected.

The bubble burst. The extent of the infection was disclosed by one man who could no longer hold back. For a remarkable period of time confusion reigned, but finally the knowledge became so well known that even the Coach himself was confronted by the cruel, inexorable facts.

It seemed too much for any man, even the Coach, to take. He secluded himself for a period at a retreat in the wooded hills, totally alone. Those sympathetic feared for him. His followers—and there were many, though he had his critics—suffered with him, sharing his anguish. And each of his devotees, involved or not, were engulfed in a feeling of hopelessness.

To the relief of all, the Coach returned from the hills, shaken and ner-

vous—one does not absorb these things readily—but in his loneliness he had made up his mind. He had overcome his emotions and had come to grips with the fact that the Institution was far more important than the personalities involved, including his own. He called in his team members and directed them all to confess their wrongdoings and take the consequences. This they did and many were forced to resign.

The Coach's agony was supreme, as these people were his family. All their errors, flagrant as they were, had been committed out of an excessive loyalty to him and the Institution. They were basically fine men but they had been carried away.

Others who knew the victims of this debacle were wrenched also, recognizing the basic decency of each but realizing that they had to go. It was Greek tragedy.

Speculation then set in as to whether the Coach would ever recover from his blow. Some predicted that he could never build another team like the one that had been decimated. Inevitably conjecture was rife whether the Coach would ever be himself again. But those who gleefully anticipated his downfall failed to take into account the Coach's personality.

For the Coach, with all his authoritarian tendencies, was a man of iron. He had lost his battles and he had won his battles. Win or lose, he had one obsession: to win.

Gradually the Coach rebuilt. He took his defeats, using scrubs for a while, but he continued to rebuild with a determination that few men could muster. Gradually he and his new team came from the depths of defeat to eventual renewed success. When it finally came time for him to set aside his responsibilities as Coach, he had once more created a team that went undefeated for the season. The Coach, exonerated, retired, and the Institution was restored.

The Coach I have in mind is Col. Earl H. Blaik, who produced the greatest football teams that West Point ever put on the field. The period of his life crisis was the summer of 1951, when ninety cadets turned in their resignations as the result of a cheating scandal that rocked the Military Academy. It encompassed his whole football team and his son was among them. The bulk of his players have gone on to success, some in sports, some in other fields. In the final analysis the greatness of Earl Blaik was responsible.

Is there any reason to believe that our nation's Coach, Richard Nixon, will do less?

John S. D. Eisenhower is a West Pointer, author and former Ambassador to Belgium.