

A Fall From Rome

By Russell Baker

OBSERVER

When Lepidus, Antony and Octavian, later to be Caesar Augustus, had won the civil war and taken power in Rome, they compiled proscription lists of persons to be killed in order to secure serenity in a turbulent state. It was an occasion for settling old scores in blood. Each of the three new masters of Rome fattened the death lists with the names of his foes, and in the purge that followed many who had been the best of Rome perished.

Cicero had his head cut off and, at Antony's command, his hands too. The hands had offended Antony by writing the Philippics, a set of orations against Antony. Head and hands, according to Plutarch, were brought to Rome and fastened over the rostra where orators addressed the public. In those days, government really knew how to discourage dissent.

The history is recited here to place President Nixon's "enemy list" in perspective. Compiling lists of enemies whose parts will be nailed over the rostra in the sweet wake of victory is not new with the Nixon Administration, and there is no point in getting worked up about that aspect of it.

Half the joy of politics seems to lie in taking revenge on one's enemies. Every Administration has its spite list of persons who will not be invited to do the fox trot in the East Room, and in Washington men of decency and sensibility commonly pride themselves upon being on it.

A difficulty becomes manifest. When half the job of politics lies in taking vengeance after the campaign, we are in trouble, for the other half obviously lies in the campaigning itself. This leaves no joy for the business of governing, which is what these people are supposed to be elected to do.

This may explain why so much of the governing that goes on these days is so inferior. The politicians, tending to look upon it as strong men look upon housework, more and more leave it up to non-politicians—hired hands answerable not to the governed but only to the boss.

If the boss has odd whims, as Mr. Nixon apparently had, with his appetite for being made to feel beleaguered, maligned and surrounded by potential betrayers, it is probably inevitable that the hired hands will try to satisfy them.

Henry Kissinger did when he engaged in wiretapping to test friends and colleagues for possible treason against the boss, and Mr. Kissinger is commonly cited as the elegant spirit of this particular White House staff, a lonely diamond in a goat's ear.

It is not surprising then that coarser spirits should have found enemies for the President lurking in every edition of the paper, infesting stage and screen and television and even, as in the case

of Joe Namath, tossing the football at Shea Stadium.

One imagines the President crying, "Enemies! Enemies! Have I no friends?" after the latest proscription list has been laid before him. What! Even Barbra Streisand is not to be trusted? Such lists must have comforted old Stalin in his final paranoiac days, but surely President Nixon could not have scanned these lists without grieving.

Without pondering why the enemies were so many.

One imagines him in the gentle vein crying, "Good Haldeman, sweet Colson, tell me no more of mine enemies! List for me rather all those dear friends whose faith, love and fealty may support us in our extremity."

And one imagines, further, good Haldeman and sweet Colson uneasy now, for listing friends can be dangerous, trusting anyone may be fatal.

"There is good Bebe Rebozo, Mr. President."

"And generous, kind Bob Abplanalp, Mr. President."

"Excellent, excellent. But you have forgotten worthy Elmer Bobst. And what, sweet Colson, of our dear loyal Robert Finch?"

One fancies a bit of throat-clearing here. Dangerous ground has been entered. Who wants to be the man responsible for having said that dear loyal Finch could be trusted? It is safer extending the list of enemies. And so *ad* and *ad* it grows *infinitum*.

When compared to the proscriptions of the Second Triumvirate, details of the Nixon "enemy list" make our time seem shabby and ignoble. There is a certain barbaric grandeur in being killed for ending on the losing political side, at least if one is spared the pious mockery of a trial.

Politicians who would coolly kill the losers without hypocrisy about legality must be credited with high style. How seamy, by contrast, was to be the fate of those on the Nixon "enemy list." They were to be "screwed." As the memo passed from Mr. Dean to Messrs. Haldeman and Ehrlichman put it, the White House would "use the available Federal machinery to screw our political enemies."

After determining "how we can best screw them," a Mr. Nofziger would "give them a hard time" and "do a job" on them. "Screwing" was apparently to be piecemeal destruction—blackening of reputation, harassing court actions and internal revenue pressures, attempts to wipe out the victim's capital—all those mean-spirited bureaucratic murder techniques which we have developed for destroying political victims without blood.

That is "screwing." The Romans at least had style.