

HERB CAEN



The Man in the Glass Cage

"ARE YOU GOING to watch 'To Tell the Truth' tonight?" smiled the receptionist in the doctor's office Wednesday afternoon. For a second I didn't get it. Then I nodded as a man in a corner of the waiting room grunted "more like 'Admission Impossible.'" Chase Webb had already sent a kite my way reading "No matter what President Nixon says tonight he is certain to go down in history . . ."

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AS 6 P.M. approached, I got butterflies in the stomach (imagine what Mr. Nixon was going through, his final dusting of makeup being applied at that very moment). Would it be another "Checkers" embarrassment, or would it be the so-called Real Nixon, eyes cold, jaw set in firm resolve, lashing out at his enemies, or would it be just more of the Old Nixon Doubletalk, the words going around in circles to dizzy the listener? At 6, the sort of dumb but honest face of John Chancellor appeared, followed by the Great Seal. Who always follows the seal act in a circus? Bring on the jugglers!

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OUTSIDE THE WINDOW, the August fog was streaking past, an appropriate backdrop for the cloudy words to follow. Mr. Nixon faced the camera, a small brave smile on his lips. With his Gallup at around 30 per cent approval, you had to feel sorry for him. "Why is he always EXPLAINING something?" I had written about Mr. Nixon a decade ago, and here he was explaining again, earnestly. My thoughts raced back to Eleanor Roosevelt, visiting her friend, Mayris Chaney, in Mayris' apartment in Alta St. on Telegraph Hill. "The trouble with Mr. Nixon," Mrs. Roosevelt said at one point, "is that he has no convictions, absolutely none" . . . Not yet, at any rate.

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THE WORDS DRONED ON, those slippery words so hard to get a grip on. Mr. Nixon is said to edit his own speeches; perhaps he is the one responsible for inserting all the adjectives that water down the nouns, a shrewd move (as Voltaire once said, "the adjective is the enemy of the noun"). At one point, in a startling example of nature following art, he sounded like David Frye doing his Nixon imitation. ("As President," goes a Frye routine, "I accept full responsibility for Watergate. But not the blame. Today I have fired 5732 of the finest public servants I have ever known.")

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MR. NIXON'S FACE flickered and changed col-

ors on the TV screen. Perhaps the made-in-Japan tube was to blame. A sudden thought flickered, too: Tuesday, August 14, marked the 28th anniversary of VJ-Day, ending World War II, but nobody noticed, nobody remembered, perhaps nobody cared . . . I stared at him as he pursed his lips primly over a schoolmasterish phrase. What an enigma, this Whittier boy with Quakerish background. Why is he now so fond of pomp of office and panoply of luxurious houses? He looks to be a much more austere person, even plain, and yet he loves brass fanfares at his receptions and designed, personally, Palace Guard uniforms till the world laughed him out of it . . . If he has a sense of humor, there is no record of it. If he has charm, it is not apparent. If he actually believes in what he is saying, he is not convincing.

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BE FAIR, you say to yourself; there's Russia, China, the end of the war in Indochina, no matter how reluctantly wound down by this man in the glass cage . . . A few hours earlier I had picked up my copy of the London Sunday Times at the newsstand near Geary and Mason. Inside, there was a photo of a weeping Cambodian man, 10 of whose 11 children had been killed in the "mistake" bombing of the town of Neak Luong by American B-52s. As the President spoke, no remorse in his voice, only self-righteousness, I stared at the photo and then at this tatement by Colonel David H. E. Opfer, the U.S. Air attache in Cambodia. Asked about the Neak Luong tragedy, the Colonel said, "I saw one stick of bombs hrough the town, but it was no great disaster" . . . You couldn't help wondering what Colonel Opfer would call it if a string of bombs fell through his some town, by mistake, delivered by an invisible enemy against a blameless people . . . Are Colonel Opfer's words the real Voice of America?

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"NO AMNESTY," Mr. Nixon said of those who expressed their opposition to the Indochina war by fleeing this country, and here, Wednesday night, was Mr. Nixon asking for amnesty, a word he should be able to live with since it means to forget, not to forgive. Forget Watergate and get on with the real problems, he was saying . . . We have been living with them for so long—forever, even if you go all the way back to Coolidge and he was no bargain. There's a new film around called "American Graffiti" that purports to tell us of the "carefree innocence of the early 1960s, mind you, when the world was reeling under the Bay of Pigs, the Cuban missile crisis and an undeclared war in Vietnam that was growing— . . . All of us should pray for amnesty, no matter what our position on that war . . .

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WEDNESDAY NIGHT, FOR the first time since the "carefree innocence" of John F. Kennedy's era, no American planes were dropping bombs anywhere in the world. So far as we knew. We lifted a tentative toast to the Secretary of the Air Force who hadn't known we were bombing Cambodia, and shakily to peace in what is left of our time. At 9 p.m., KQED replayed the Nixon speech, preempting "You Can Help—Throw It Here," a documentary on the garbage problem.