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The President And the Polls

With three years and five months left of his second term, President Nixon has been told by Dr. George Gallup's masked 1435 pollees that his popularity has plummeted to 31 percent.

A 31 percent acceptance rating, if you happen to be president, is calamitous. It is the lowest figure in two decades, matching the nadir of President Truman at the end of his tenure in January, 1953.

Truman was virtually drummed out of Washington the day he turned the rotten job over to Dwight Eisenhower. Only a handful of his firmest friends saw him and Bess off at Union Station as they headed back toward Independence, Mo. A Washington columnist wrote something to the effect that the train had pulled out of the station "with a jerk." Lots of people laughed at that nifty.

But upon his death last December, it was generally agreed Truman had been one of the five or six great presidents in the nation's history.

Nixon, too, may derive comfort from the therapeutic value of the passage of time. But, at the moment, there can be no comfort for that beleaguered man or the running mate who were returned to office with overwhelming public approval only last November. They received 45,767,218 votes to the McGovern-Shriver pair's 28,357,668. Their victory in the electoral college was a pulverizing 521 to 17.

But a poll made last week for NBC by Oliver Quayle & Company indicated if the 1972 election could be replayed as of that day, the Democrats would win 51 to 49 in the percentage of votes cast.

A President believes in polls devoutly if they predict he is going to win, or is doing fine in office. He curses them as fraudulent, if not seditious, when they blow a sour bugle. But he never ignores them.

White House press spokesmen have asked the American public to believe President Nixon did not turn on any of the three TV sets he has in the oval office during the weeks of Senate Watergate Committee hearings that brought him to his knees. Nor, it was said, did he watch during those long days in the hospital while being treated for his virus — yet some eagle-eyed reporter noted that when the president moved out of the hospital suite, four television sets were moved out, too.

Polls became a fetish with Lyndon Johnson. During an interview with him a year before his bowing-out speech of March, 1968, LBJ twice summoned his secretary from her office and ordered her to produce his file on polls. His critics had noticed at that time his popularity quotient had sunk to 54.

"Let me tell you something, mister," he said, waving a boney forefinger, "Fifty-four is the same figure Eisenhower had right after he beat Adlai Stevenson the first time. Everybody said that was great. Now they say I'm in a hell of a fix because I used to have a sixty!"

Nixon's popularity figure was 68 at his second inauguration. His present 31 is about ten points under the figure which prompted LBJ to throw in the towel.

So, Nixon must be saying, they are only polls. They represent a sampling of the opinions of a more or less microscopic percentage of the U.S. population. The hell with them. They may not be believed by very many people overseas, who recently — when asked by many New York Times correspondents — said Nixon was still highly respected for what he did in bringing the war to a close, springing the POWs, and patching up relations with China and Russia.

But, in this country, polls nevertheless drag the President down, mentally and physically.

And what's happened to Nixon would be unbearable for even a saint.

Or the biblical hard luck champion, the prophet Job.

According to the polls, that is...