

The President and His Enemies

One of Grover Cleveland's campaign slogans was: "We love him for the enemies he has made." In a sense, that slogan sums up Richard Nixon's basic political technique, since way back to the days of Alger Hiss and Helen Gahagan Douglas. As the tone and thrust of his press conference made clear, the President, even more than ever before, is relying on his enemies to rescue him from the deep trouble in which he finds himself.

The press conference was the first real plus for the President in many long months, and it came in the nick of time. The President had planned a three-stage comeback attempt. The first stage was his nationally televised apology on Watergate. It flopped.

The flop was recognized as such not just by the hated "Eastern liberal press" but by most of the hard-core Republicans on Capitol Hill and by many Republican newspapers, including the august Chicago Tribune. It must have seemed to the President the most unkindest cut of all when the Tribune, commenting on the speech, compared him to "the draft-dodgers," and suggested that both he and the draft-dodgers still had "somehow to redeem themselves."

The second stage was the speech in New Orleans. It flopped too. The President had a wholly defensible case to make about the "secret bombing" of Cambodia. But instead of making his case in a rational and sensible way, the President made it in an angry and unconvincing way. Moreover, his oddly fevered manner, plus the Ziegler shoving incident, had started the Washington rumor mills grinding out the rumor that he was on the naked edge of a nervous breakdown.

That was certainly one reason why he scheduled the press conference so quickly. As the press conference started, the President was quite obviously nervous. He had a right to be nervous. If the meeting with the press had also been a flop, the disaster would have been almost uncontainable. Three strikes and out.

The press conference was certainly not a home run, but it was at least a respectable base hit. It proved that the President had not gone round the bend, despite the rumors. It obviously cost him an effort to appear blandly good-humored, but the effort succeeded. The Watergate exegetes can no doubt show that he fudged, or worse, a number of questions, but the Watergate exegetes are a small minority, and to most of the citizenry Nixon's answers no doubt sounded sensible and convincing enough. Above all, the press conference proved the old rule, previously cited in this space, that in a

"facedown between the President and the angry press, the President almost automatically wins."

The White House press corps in San Clemente was obviously angry, despite the "sirs"—angry enough to convince a lot of citizens that the press is indeed "out to get" the President. Nixon himself emphasized this theme, when he talked of the "great number of people in this country that didn't accept the mandate of 1972," who would "prefer that I fail." Among these people he included "some members of the press, perhaps, some members of the television, perhaps . . ." Those qualifying "somes" and "perhapses" were not, and were not meant to be, convincing.

The "members of the press" and "the members of the television," in short, number very prominently among those useful "enemies he has made." Further face-downs between the President and the angry press can

Mr. Alsop writes a weekly column for Newsweek from which this is reprinted.

be confidently predicted, now that the President has discovered how easy it is to win such seemingly one-sided battles.

The battles are not charades. The detestation of Nixon by most of the press is deep and real, as anyone who has any contact with the Washington press corps knows. The President's resentment of the media is just as deep and just as real. The press has good reasons for feeling as it does. But so, from his own angle vision, does the President.

It is interesting, though risky, to try to see the President's situation as it must appear through his eyes. When he says that he did not know about the Watergate cover-up until March, he is probably telling what seems to him, or what has come to seem to him, the simple truth.

The Ervin committee testimony made one thing clear. In his approach to Watergate, Nixon had a lot in common with the people who refuse to consult the doctor about that queer chest pain or that mysterious lump, because they don't want to be told what it means. The President very much didn't want to be told what Watergate meant, which is why he is telling what seems to him the truth.

Yet, two-thirds of his compatriots, according to the polls, do not believe that he is telling the truth. They believe that he took part in the Watergate cover-up, and thus was guilty of a felony. In the President's eyes, this no doubt seems grossly unfair, and the

gross unfairness can of course be blamed on "the enemies he has made," above all those relentless enemies in the media.

To the presidential enemies, this may appear further evidence of Nixonian paranoia. But as Henry Kissinger has remarked in jest, "even paranoiacs have real enemies," and Nixon's enemies are entirely real. He must sometimes ask himself the plaintive question of Louis XV: "What have I done that they should hate me so?"

It is an interesting question. Lyndon Johnson was hated too ("Hey, hey, LBJ. How many kids have you killed today?"), and so was Franklin Roosevelt ("a traitor to his class"). There were solid reasons for this hatred—in Johnson's case, the Vietnam war, in Roosevelt's, the transfer of real power from Wall Street to Washington. It is much more difficult to define the reasons for the hatred of Nixon, which of course existed long before Watergate.

Far more than in the case of Johnson or Roosevelt, it seems to relate to personality more than policy, to manner more than matter. One can dimly understand the combined sense of outrage and insecurity that the sense of being afloat in a sea of hatred must generate in the President. One can also understand why the Cleveland slogan has become Richard Nixon's basic technique, why he reaches out beyond "the enemies he has made" to build a solid constituency "out there," to borrow a phrase from Theodore White's most recent and best book.

The technique is not new—Franklin Roosevelt used a rather similar technique. As Watergate recedes into the background, it may work for a while. It may even work for three-plus years. But one wonders what might happen if the time of crisis comes, as it has to most modern Presidents, when the President has to say to all the people: "Trust me." For now, even those who "love him for the enemies he has made" do not much trust him.

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PHILIP L. GRAHAM, 1915-1963

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