

# Part Lion, Fox, Ass

"The Prince must be a lion," wrote Machiavelli, "but he must also know how to play the fox." President Nixon has shown that he knows how to be a lion, and he certainly knows how to play the fox. But if you consider the terrible situation in which this strange man finds himself, and how he got there, you have to conclude that there is in him something of still another symbol-animal: namely, the ass.

In the last couple of weeks, the President has both acted the lion and played the fox. But he is still in terrible trouble—the worst trouble of any modern President—and the basic reason is that he has done, or permitted

*This article is adapted from Mr. Alsop's Newsweek column.*

The President's decision to order a massive military airlift to Israel was surely leonine, given the risks involved. So was his decision to face down the Russian threat to send troops to the Middle East unilaterally. As this is written, the crisis seems to have cooled as a result, but the President will get precious little credit for the cooling. To be done for him, some of the most asinine things in American political history.

By this time a majority of his countrymen suspect he is playing the fox even when he is acting the lion. They suspect, for example, that the U.S.-So-

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viet face-down was just the President's foxy way of diverting attention from his domestic troubles. The suspicion is totally without foundation, but it is widespread all the same.

On the domestic front, the suspicion that the two missing tapes are missing because the foxy President wanted them out of the way may or may not be without foundation. But the suspicion is just about universal, and the President's offer of the tapes to Judge Sirica, which he certainly expected to end the threat of impeachment, has had, if anything, the opposite effect.

True, the President is at last rid of what he surely regarded as a viper in his bosom, in the shape of Special Prosecutor Archibald Cox. No President in American history has ever employed in his own executive branch a man with the means, the skill and the will to threaten seriously to put the President's chief aides and intimates, and conceivably the President himself, behind bars. As long as Cox was in the Justice Department, the President could not be master in his own house.

Now the President is again, in theory, master in his own house. The trouble is that the house is rapidly collapsing. For something rather mysterious seems to have happened.

The firing of Cox, following immediately on the downfall of Agnew, seems to have been the catalyst. What has happened is that the hard-core Nixon constituency, which stuck with him all through the Watergate horrors, has just about melted away.

On Capitol Hill, the President has hardly any real defenders left. There is hardly a member of either house who would not now agree, at least in private, that the country would be better off with another President, almost any other President. The Hill, as always, is listening to the country, and to judge from what it is hearing, almost the whole country has suddenly

turned thumbs down on the President, as capricious Roman crowds did to suddenly unpopular gladiators. "The message I keep getting," says one senator, "is 'Impeach the s.o.b.'"

So it begins to seem that in the end it will do the President no good to act the lion, or to play the fox. And the basic reason is that so many of the things that he has done, or that have been done in his name, have been simply asinine.

There is an easy way to judge whether or not an act is asinine. It is to ask: How much good can this do, and how much harm? If the potential harm greatly outweighs the potential good, then the act is asinine.

By this test, the Watergate break-in was quintessentially asinine, sublimely asinine. It would not require the most modest intelligence to perceive that bugging Larry O'Brien's office could not possibly do the Nixon Administration any good, and might do it enormous harm.

Apply the same asininity test to any one of a series of the acts which have led the President to the brink of ruin, and in each case the act is shown to have been truly asinine. Take, for example, the President's famous tapes.

President Kennedy did a bit of quiet taping, and President Johnson did quite a lot of it. But in each case they themselves decided who was to be taped, and when, and why. Johnson had a button underneath his desk which he used to turn the machine on or off.

President Nixon had no button. His tapes were "voice-actuated"—as soon as anyone began talking in one of his several principal offices, the tapes began to whir. Again, apply the asininity test, and the test is indisputably positive. And it was Nixon himself, mind you, who approved this asinine taping system, which was later to get him into such awful trouble.

Or take money. Wherever money is concerned, the asininity test is always positive. A non-asinine politician would instantly recognize the political danger involved in the lavish spending of the taxpayers' money to improve his private estates. Or consider the \$100,000 in cash from Howard Hughes in Bebe Rebozo's safe-deposit box. If Rebozo did not tell the President about the money, then the President was very foolish—asinine, in a word—to have a friend who would keep him in the dark on so sensitive a matter. If Rebozo did tell him, the President was just as asinine not to tell Rebozo to return the money immediately, or at the very least to turn it over to the Republican Finance Committee.

Or take the Milk Money, or the ITT Money, or the Vesco Money. The

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Nixon campaign had no more desperate need for this money than Nelson Rockefeller has for a \$10 bill. And yet, with the President's consent and encouragement, great and unnecessary risks were taken to get rather small dollops of this kind of compromised money.

It is necessary to worry about being fair to Richard Nixon. Now that he is so badly wounded, it is too easy to join the pack baying behind him. For the man can be a lion, and he has served his country well in that role. As for his foxiness, a certain duplicity is needful in a President. But to a quite astonishing extent, Richard Nixon can also be an ass, and that is his downfall.