

One Down And Three to Go

By James Reston

WASHINGTON, Nov. 6—On the first anniversary of Richard Nixon's spectacular re-election victory, this city is still trying to analyze what it was in his character that brought about the greatest fall since Lucifer.

History suggests a partial explanation: Landslide victories tend to distort men's judgments. Franklin Roosevelt swept the country in 1936 and stumbled into the Supreme Court packing controversy. Lyndon Johnson plunged from his triumph in 1964 into a reckless adventure in Vietnam, which finally drove him from office. And Richard Nixon interpreted his 1972 victory as a mandate to impose his will on the Congress.

There was a theory a year ago that Mr. Nixon would see his victory as the final reward of a truly remarkable political career, and that he would use it to bring about an era of reconciliation before the 200th anniversary of the Declaration in 1976.

He did not want reconciliation, however, but vindication, and even retribution. Though the voters had strengthened the Democratic majorities in the Congress, while giving him the largest popular majority in history, he chose to interpret the election results as a personal mandate to work his will on the Congress, to carry on the war as he pleased without consultation, to impound funds voted by the Congress, and to reorganize and centralize his Government behind the executive privilege of the White House.

I remember going to the White House shortly after the election of 1972 and discussing with one of his most trusted aides the possibility of reconciliation. "It will not come from this house," he said. "The President does not want to make peace with his critics: He wants them to admit publicly that they were wrong."

Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., the historian, in a new book, "The Imperial Presidency," argues that Mr. Nixon, facing enormous tasks at home and abroad, came to believe that it was in the national interest to evade the tiresome oversight of the Congress and direct affairs from the White House, and that something compulsive in the President's character drove him in this direction.

"His revolution," Mr. Schlesinger wrote, "took direction and color not just from external circumstances pressing new powers on the Presidency, but from the drives and needs of his own agitated psyche. This was the fatal flaw in the revolutionary design. For everywhere around him he saw hideous threats to the national security...."

"Nixon's Presidency was not an aberration but a culmination. It carried to reckless extremes a compulsion toward Presidential power rising out of deep-running changes in the foundations of society. In a time of the acceleration of history and the decay of traditional institutions and values, a strong Presidency was both a greater necessity than ever before and a greater risk—necessary to hold a spinning and distracted society together, necessary to make the separation of powers work, risky because of the awful temptation held out to override the separation of powers and burst the bonds of the Constitution."

Many people here would disagree that Mr. Nixon set out consciously to burst the bonds of the Constitution, but many would certainly agree that this was the result, and that the nation required a strong Presidency for leadership and the separation of powers for liberty but got from Mr. Nixon a stronger Presidency at the expense of both Congress and liberty.

There were other personal aspects to this tragedy. The desire to avoid the frustrations of dealing with Congress or answering the awkward questions of the press led to the secrecy of the White House, to the isolation of the President with a small staff and a very few friends. Only in this closed atmosphere did he seem comfortable.

This, of course, has always been his way. He has always seen himself living in a hostile world, surrounded by subversives and conspirators. Therefore: a small staff of personal loyalists, who fed his fears and anxieties, and betrayed him in the end.

A year ago, nobody here could even have imagined the terrible retribution of recent events. Even Watergate might have been overcome if he had been candid right after the election instead of cagey and defiant, if he had made half as many concessions early as he has made late, if he had been faithful to his own promises to seek "reconciliation instead of confrontation" at home as well as abroad.

The result is that his election mandate has now dwindled to the lowest point in the popularity polls of any President in the last twenty years, and he is facing the most serious threat of impeachment of any President in a century. "How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning!"

Nevertheless, the dangers of secrecy still exist. He is still isolated in the White House, Camp David, Key Biscayne or San Clemente with a different but equally small staff, facing the courts and the Congress only when forced to do so, and living like a man under siege.

It was left to his press secretary, Ronald Ziegler, to prove that even now the White House has not learned the lessons of this terrible year. The President, Mr. Ziegler assured the reporters coming back from Florida the other night, "recognizes the importance of this foolishness."