

The Temptation to Quit

Nixon Has Overcome Many Hurdles But Often After He Almost Gave Up

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The Richard Nixon who insists that he will not resign over the Watergate scandals is following the formula for handling crises that has enabled him to overcome adversity through much of his long political career.

The formula, which includes aggressive counterattacks as an essential element, has yet to work in the Watergate case despite repeated attempts. The question is whether the President will now listen to another aspect of his make-up—the Richard Nixon who throughout the years has counseled him to give up.

Despite the President's vigorous rhetoric in his nationwide television address last week, he has not given the final answer to that question. Like the good politician he is, Mr. Nixon has left himself an out. He did not deliver a flat, "I will not resign" statement. Instead, he said "I have no intention whatever of walking away from the job I was elected to do," then added a health proviso, "as long as I am physically able."

'Intention' Could Change.
Conceivably, his "intention" could change—if there are new disclosures in the Watergate scandals, if his moves fail to convince Congressmen of his honesty and credibility, if there are more demands that he resign and if there is a further erosion of his ability to govern. In fact, the President's intention has already changed a number of times during the Watergate period. At first the White House sought to dissociate the President from the case. Two days after the break-in at the Democratic National Committee, Ronald L. Ziegler, the press secretary, refused to comment, calling it a "third-rate burglary attempt." For months the White House turned aside queries on subsequent developments.

That tactic fitted in with the usual Nixon practice of handling problems. James David Barber, the Duke University political scientist, noted in his book, "Presidential Character," that Mr. Nixon has never considered a problem a crisis unless it threatened his reach for or retention of power. He could suffer defeats on programs and appointments he was committed to, but he must fight with all his resources if his power was threatened.

Shift in Tactics
Last spring, when disclosures began to touch on the Oval Office, Mr. Nixon had to shift tactics. Then Watergate became a crisis. The President moved vigorously, ousting his chief assistants, assuming over-all blame for the situation but insisting that he knew nothing of the plans for the break-in or the cover-up. As disclosures continued, the White House denounced the press and the Senate Watergate committee.

Unlike previous crises, however, Watergate would not go away, no matter how hard Mr. Nixon tried. There were always fresh disclosures that created subcrises within the over-all crisis.

Mr. Nixon has continued to fight back. In doing so he has been calling on a formula that has served him well in his more than a quarter-century in public life.

As a young Representative, he pursued the Alger Hiss case against long odds and eventually had the satisfaction of seeing Mr. Hiss convicted for perjury in denying transmittal of Government secrets to a Soviet spy.

The Checkers Speech

In the 1952 Presidential campaign he turned a liability into an asset with his speech answering charges that businessmen had established an \$18,235 supplementary fund to help pay his expenses. In that speech, he invoked his wife's cloth coat, his 1950 Oldsmobile, his \$20,000 mortgage, his \$4,000 life insurance policy, as well as his dog Checkers. He denounced the Democrats, blaming them for the spread of Communism in Europe and Asia.

The speech worked. Instead of being forced to resign as a candidate for Vice President, as a majority of the Republican leaders and apparently General of the Army Dwight D. Eisenhower, the party's Presidential candidate, favored, Mr. Nixon increased his popularity with the voters.

In 1956, Mr. Nixon fought off a "dump-Nixon" movement within the Republican party to win renomination and re-election as Vice President.

Comeback After Defeat

In his greatest triumph he picked himself up from his defeat in the 1962 election for Governor of California and through careful preparation and hard campaigning won the Presidency in 1968.

But what has been lost sight of beneath the tough Nixon speeches, the surprise announcements, the bold attacks that have brought him success has been the temptation to quit that Mr. Nixon has faced since he was a youth. Mr. Barber's book, various biographies of the President and Mr. Nixon's own "six crises," all show that while he usually fights on,

he has come close to giving up many times.

As a junior in Whittier College young Nixon was talked out of dropping out of an election for student president by a professor's wife.

At Duke Law School he was known as "Gloomy Gus" because he would despair about his studies. "I'll never learn the law; there is too much of it," he would say, while receiving top grades.

1952 Despair Recalled

Mr. Nixon came close to giving up, too, in 1952, when General Eisenhower hesitated about keeping him on the ticket before the Checkers speech. "Dick was ready to chuck the whole thing and frankly it took the toughest arguments of some of us to hold him in check," one friend is quoted as saying.

Just before the broadcast he told his wife, "I just don't think I can go through with this one."

After the broadcast, when he heard an erroneous report that General Eisenhower had said the speech was not enough, an angry Mr. Nixon called in his secretary and dictated a telegram of resignation. The wire was never sent, but the incident demonstrates Mr. Nixon's tendency to yield after he has tried hard to win and seemingly failed.

Two years later, in 1954, the Vice President, who was widely criticized for his strong attacks on the Democrats, decided to retire from politics when his term ended. He even wrote down his decision on a piece of paper and put it into his wallet.

Ready to Depart in 1956

Mr. Nixon showed the same willingness to surrender in 1956 when General Eisenhower passed up a number of opportunities, both public and private, to ask him to run for re-election as Vice President. Convinced that President Eisenhower wanted him off the ticket, Mr. Nixon decided to call a news conference and announce he would not be a candidate for re-election. Two friends heard of his plan and talked him out of it.

While there have been many cases when Mr. Nixon came close to quitting, there are two in which he actually gave up.

The first was in 1960 when he overruled many of his advisers and decided against appealing John F. Kennedy's narrow victory in the Presidential election despite strong evidence of voting frauds in Texas and Illinois. The second instance came two years later, following his defeat in the California Governor's race, when Mr. Nixon held his "last press conference" and, after berating the press, announced that he was quitting politics to return to private life.

Both incidents offer clues as to how Mr. Nixon could be tempted to quit the fight over the Watergate scandals.

In explaining why he had not appealed the 1960 election results, Mr. Nixon said: "Our country can't afford the agony of a constitutional crisis—and I damn well will not be a party to creating one just to become President or anything else."

Explains 1962 Decision

As for his decision to quit public life in 1962, Mr. Nixon explained six years later:

"Well, at that point of time, I was going to leave public life not as a matter of choice, but because the public wanted me to leave. I'm a believer in the proposition that the individual cannot really go out and say, 'Look, here I am, people. I'm going to be your Governor or your Senator, or your Congressman, or your President,' unless people want him to do it; and in 1962, after that defeat in California, I was convinced that I was not the man for the times at that point and I was willing to accept that decision."

Both reasons—the avoidance of a constitutional crisis and the lack of public confidence—have been cited by those urging the President to resign over the Watergate scandals.

There are many factors that President Nixon would have to weigh before deciding whether to quit. For example, he would have to consider his legal status, whether he would lose his constitutional protection against criminal charges, if such charges seemed a possibility.

There is also the question of the kind of political situation that would lead the President to give up his office. Mr. Nixon has never given way to direct pressure from his opponents. He usually thinks of quitting only after repeated attempts fail to satisfy his supporters. Pressure from the conservatives in his party does not yet seem sufficient to cause him to resign.

But if the President's past is any guide, resignation, as remote as it seems at this time, remains for him a tempting alternative solution to his troubles.