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Being Wrong

By William Safire

WASHINGTON, Dec. 12 — Avid readers of this space may recall an essay this summer that used the great pendulum at the Smithsonian Institution as a symbol.

My point was that the pendulum always swung back. The likelihood of the hue and cry about Watergate continuing without letup seemed to me as remote as that of the great pendulum swinging past its ordained outer limit to crash through the wall of the museum.

"Ol' Buddy," a former White House colleague of mine pointed out today, "that pendulum of yours not only crashed through the wall but it swung up high and came crashing through the opposite wall. That's not a pendulum any more, it's a propeller."

As the year of retribution draws to a close, it might be good to claim to have experienced the secret thrill of being wrong in times like these; a hair shirt can be a fun fur.

The week this column began to appear was the week President Nixon announced he had been told of a massive cover-up in connection with Watergate. I opined that it was a good thing that Mr. Nixon had taken firm command and nipped the Watergate scandal in the bud.

That is what is called "being really wrong." Not mistaken, not slightly off base, not relatively inaccurate — but grandly, gloriously, egregiously wrong. (April 1973 might have been the wrong time to start writing a column but it was the right time to leave the White House.)

Rivaling this underestimation of the vulnerability of the first Administration equipped for instant replay was my decision, several months later, to defend Vice President Agnew against a campaign of leaks.

In that instance, I was more careful; no knee-jerk responses for this once-burnt warrior. I waited until the Vice President personally assured me that the charges were false and

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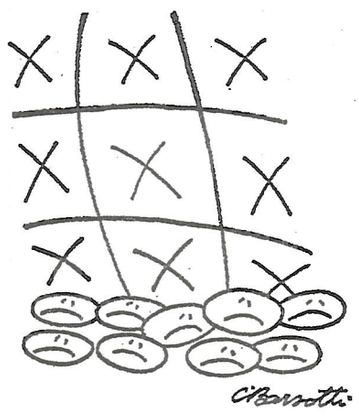

pledged to fight if indicted before I went up over the top.

However, while Mr. Agnew was telling me this on the telephone, he was negotiating his resignation. That left a few of us plodding ahead in no-man's land, bullets whizzing 'round, while, back in the trenches, the platoon leader was waving his white flag. Wrong again.

To be wrong on the grand scale like that, twice in less than a year, tempts one to boast, with Fiorello La Guardia, "When I make a mistake, it's a beaut," and to inflate other, lesser errors into apparent whoppers.

For example, I recently breathed life into the late couturier Balenciaga, who died nearly two years ago; the report of his current success is exaggerated. Also, the word "Moxie" was erroneously etymologized here as the name of a Southern soft drink, but—as dozens of irate Moxie-drinkers puckeringly pointed out—Moxie is a Boston product only recently inflicted on Southerners. Worst of all, I have twice used "lies" for "lays."

These are inaccuracies and errors, but lack the thrill of profound wrongitude. People find it pretentious and lacking in suavity to confess unimportant mistakes; that is why nobody comes forward today to say, "I was wrong about wanting to cut down the oil depletion allowance a few years ago" or "I was wrong to oppose the President on the Alaska pipeline back when it was chic to be an environmentalist."

Presidents and other punching bags experience the thrill of being really wrong, from time to time, but with a difference: If you are at the center of action, *being* wrong is perceived as *doing* wrong. To be wrong is the privilege of free men; to do wrong is the activity of criminals. But with chiefs of state, that separating semicolon blurs, and wrongbeing is universally equated with wrongdoing.

At this sentimental time of year we can sympathize with those consistently on-target doomsayers who have not felt the guiltily pleasurable twinge of being really wrong. When to be in fashion is to be in error, those who plaintively cry, "I told you so" must be counted among the Neediest cases.

Years ago, when Brooklyn Dodger slugger Dolph Camilli would come to bat late in the game, after having struck out three times in succession, an ominous murmur would race through the bleachers: "He's due."

A year from now, the crazily whirling propeller may turn back into a stately pendulum, and optimists like me may then be writing smug and arid essays "on being right." Sooner or later, somebody up there is going to enforce the law of averages—God knows we're "due."