

By Anthony Lewis

BOSTON, Feb. 24—The siege of Troy was in its seventh year, and the spirit of the Greeks was faltering. Why? In his great speech in Shakespeare's "Troilus and Cressida," Ulysses explains to Agamemnon the King.

Leadership has failed, Ulysses says. Achilles lies idle in his tent, mocking his fellow warriors. Agamemnon does not act. "Degree being vizarded, the unworthiest shows as fairly." In the word "degree" Shakespeare implies order, proportion, respect for worth. Take that away, he says, and justice is replaced by power, order by chaos. "O, when degree is shak'd . . . , then enterprise is sick!"

It is a classic idea that a whole community may be infected by the sickness of its leadership, by a failure of ideals at the top. The theme is put in its starkest form in "Oedipus": Thebes is afflicted by plague because of the moral corruption of the king.

The parallel with American society in the year 1974 needs no underlining. Degree is scorned in the White House, and the country sickens. There is no respect for truth, and the community loses the belief that knits it together. Lust for power replaces love of justice, and there is chaos in the land.

We are infected by corruption at the top, and most of us know it. Americans may hesitate at what seems to some regicide, but they understand that their sickness comes from the king.

That is the meaning of the message sent by the voters of Grand Rapids when they elected a Democrat to Gerald Ford's old seat in Congress. It was not Watergate alone that troubled them but the gasoline lines, the economic shadows, the sense of not believing—in some, the uncertainty and foreboding that afflict ordinary people

ABROAD AT HOME

in America today. No President can cure all ills. But in the classic sense, the Shakespearean sense, Richard Nixon is responsible for our disorder.

In classic drama, the resolution may come when the tragic hero gains insight into his own flawed nature. Oedipus's terrible understanding, and then his self-punishment, freed Thebes from plague. America's tragedy today is that, on the record so far, there is no likelihood of President Nixon achieving the necessary moral understanding of himself or of his responsibility.

What is special about him is his utter detachment from the norms of morality, the standards of leadership, that are the premise of successful democratic government. We expect two things of our leaders: an inner sense of order and decency, and a respect for the office they hold. There is nothing inside Richard Nixon, and he has not been exalted by the great office of the Presidency.

Some liberal critics of Mr. Nixon make the mistake of thinking that he is a figure of conscious cynicism, one who practices to deceive. That devilish view is quite wrong. Mr. Nixon draws his strengths from the fact that he has no standards except belief in himself. Like Bismarck or Henry Kissinger, he is thus always perfectly sincere.

He may grossly violate the privacy of American citizens and then, with perfect sincerity, make a speech glorifying the right to privacy; he sees no inconsistency because there is a constant: his interest. He is quite genuine in believing that all Presidents abuse tax loopholes and wiretap and turn a blind eye to lawlessness, and therefore in thinking that liberals are unfairly

picking on him for doing those things. He simply does not understand that other human beings have built-in restraints inhibiting the identification of self with right.

The other distinctive Nixon characteristic is the desire for power without responsibility. In the fantasy world that he tries to project on us, Presidents know nothing about politics or their own finances or the crimes of their associates. Lyndon Johnson suffered from grievous faults of character, but he never pretended that anyone but the President was responsible.

Mr. Nixon is a courageous man in his own way; no critic should mistake that. He has stood up to pressures that would have crushed many, and he may well go on with his lifelong pattern of lonely struggle at any cost.

The danger of that courage is that it is based on insensitivity. Worst of all in terms of the country's interest, is the attempt to detach himself from responsibility for the exercise of Presidential power. That way lies a society in which faceless men carry out orders that no one admits responsibility for giving.

In American society the response to that danger can only come from the citizenry. We do not look to gods or to Shakespeare's sense of hierarchy to restore the natural order of things. We can only look to ourselves.

Americans may take satisfaction as other institutions—Congress, the courts, the press—respond to abuse in the Presidency. But if in the end we are not ourselves ready to act against Richard Nixon, his values will have been accepted. It is as James Madison told his fellow Virginians when they debated the new Constitution: "No theoretical checks, no form of government . . . will secure liberty or happiness without any virtue in the people."