

And Now, Two Toots by Clarabell

A Commentary

By Nicholas Von Hoffman

David Eisenhower doesn't look quite as much like Howdy Doody in the flesh as he does in photographs, but he does radiate the same spirit of smiling, happy compliance with the adult world. He and his wife, the President's daughter Julie, had called a press conference or had had a press conference called for them in the East Garden of the White House.

A mildly bizarre and not unmoving episode in the story of the events leading to the first unseating of a sitting American president—one record Richard Nixon would be happy to keep out of Guinness. The daughter and the son in law: he light and likeable, she intelligent and not without power of personality—but they were still two cripples whom the media suspected of having been pushed out in front in a futile but tasteless try to get sympathy for the old man.

Julie insisted the conference had been called to accommodate the scores of reporters calling to find out what these two young ones thought. Between the press and the Nixons, suspicion and rancor is so bad that there can't even be agreement as to how this conference was called among the East Garden tulips with the tourists looking in from behind a glass wall and the strangest sort of Latin-American muzak caressing us all, TV cameramen, Secret Service protectors and White House staffers, people who evidently haven't faced the fact that some day when they apply for a new job they will have to fill out the line which asks, "place of last employment."

The media had been surprised at the size of its own turnout. In the old days a weekend press conference by a married presidential daughter would have brought forth nothing more than a corporal's guard of society reporters, but this had foreign correspondents from London and Tokyo. "Maybe," someone had suggested, "she's going to announce she's pregnant and then beg for mercy." "No," another corrected, "what she's going to say is 'At this very moment while I am talking to you, my father is flying to meet Bob Vesco in the Bahamas. He asked me to tell you that while parts of this trip may look funny, when the full story is known he will resume his constitutional position in your hearts and public opinion polls.'"

In an awkward atmosphere of, well, *you* say something, you invited us, no, it was you who asked us,

there was little of that leaping up from the chair with the arms waving that you see the reporters do at presidential press conferences. A man from one of the television networks prefaced his question by remarking she was the wrong person to ask but since she'd volunteered. . . . Julie's voice started to tear up and, whether out of concern for her or horror at the thought of a weeping Julie on the evening news, the questioners backed off.

You can also have a drop of sympathy for Nixon. He gets crucified for deleting his epithets and accused of racial and ethnic slurs when they escape deletion and hit the open air. The list of crimes which Nixon hasn't yet been accused of is diminishing rapidly.

It doesn't matter that he didn't and couldn't have committed so many. The telling thing is the public accusation, for each time he gets the level finger pointed at him he is shrunk and lessened by that much more. White House people like that poor tiddery-stuttery J. Fred Buzhardt don't understand that. They get on the television and say the boss is the victim of a giant conspiracy, of charges flung in from everywhere.

It is true. The nation is conspiring to stone him into political extinction. The idea is to get a unanimity for the regicidal act. Everyone must be compromised so after it is done there will be no one left to reproach the rest. It's Caesar's murder; everyone must take a stab, and no Marc Antony's allowed to shirk his duty.

Not nice to watch, but it does make sense. It not only forestalls future recriminations and revenge, it preserves a powerful presidency. A president driven out of office by a united if morally rabid nation sets no precedent. Nixon becomes the ugly exception to the American historical rule, not the precursor of a changeover to a parliamentary system.

His besmirchment also makes his expulsion the more certain. Ruined and dishonored, he has become the sacrificial Big Fish of his own transcripts. He must either be devoured or lie in impotent putrefaction for 2½ years—unless Congress wants to have him packed in in fresh ice every day.

The exact manner that death will overtake him is not given us to see, but there will be no Richard M. Nixon High Schools, no more than Spiro Agnew Freeways, which does not mean that there shan't be new grotesqueries. We've had Julie in the East Garden. Mamie awaits perhaps among the roses.