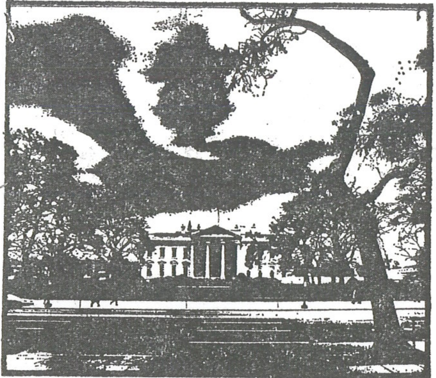

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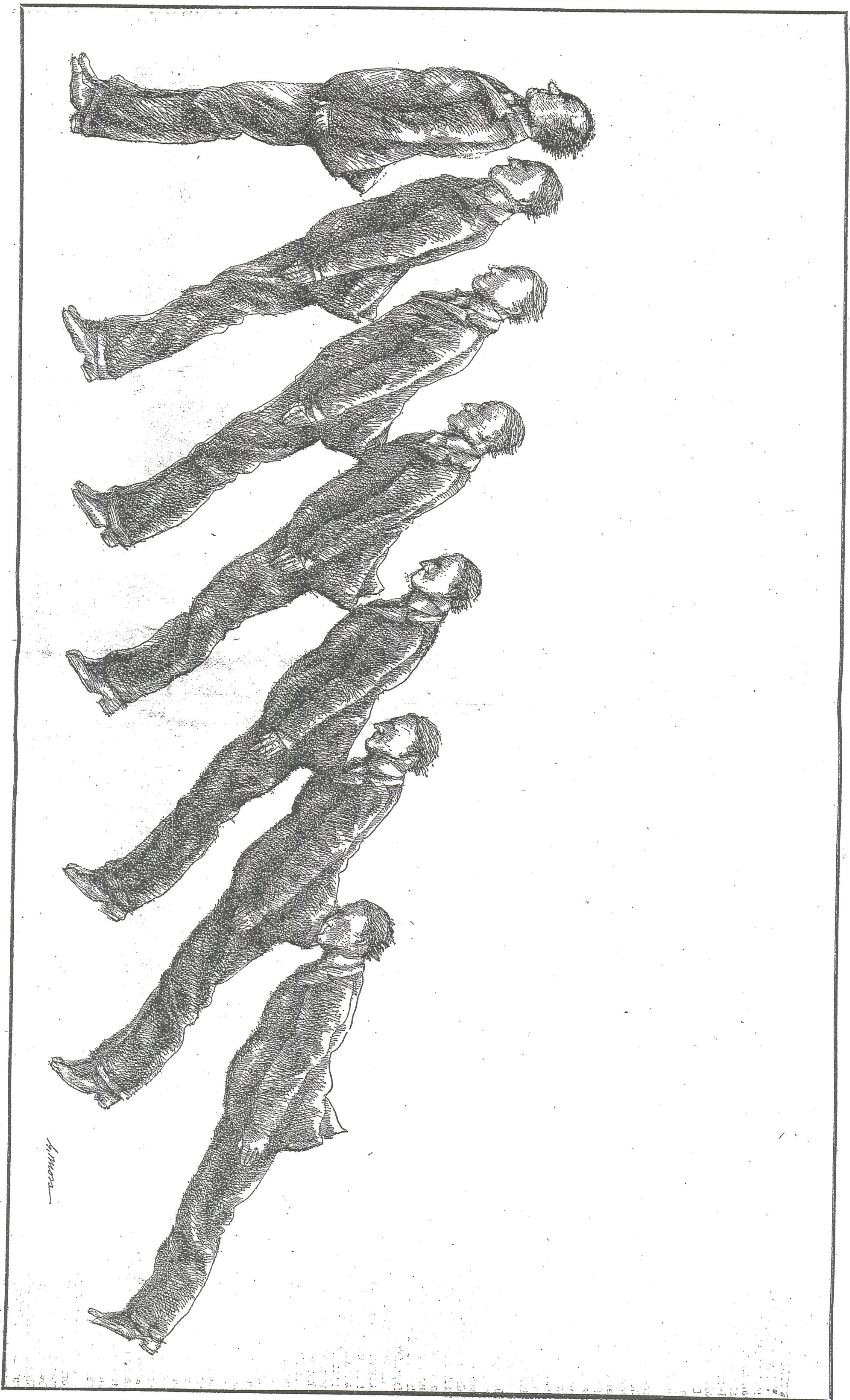
# *High Drama and Flawed Character In a Theater Too Accustomed to Tragedy*



*By William Greider*

OUR KING WAS ruled by troubled sleep, undone by the ghosts of his secret self.

The nation trembles at this awesome drama which is now complete, the fall of Richard Nixon. It was an ancient epic retold in the brutal poetry of modern life, more gripping than the classics because the stage was real, the theater was our own democracy.

He seemed so bold and powerful in the sunlight days of his presidency, capable of great moments. Yet, in his private darkness, he was merely weak, nursing old wounds and fears, feeding the stale resentments which wiser men put aside. Americans and the world knew the first, the public leader of commanding stature. The unfolding drama taught them about the second man and his fatal flaws.

"Let's make the next four years the best four years in American history," the President proclaimed in his hour of triumph. He was surrounded by affectionate crowds, saluted by drums and the flourish of trumpets. No one could pull down a leader endorsed so overwhelmingly by the people, supported by 61 per cent of the voters and 49 of the states.

But Richard Nixon's unprecedented victory did not heal his dark wounds or completely satisfy his need for vengeance and vindication. In the privacy of his Oval Office with his re-election assured, he talked of getting even. "I think we are going to fix the son-of-a-bitch," the President told his applauding courtiers, referring to Edward Bennett Williams. "Believe me, we are going to."

At the inaugural podium, he spoke of higher ambitions, a pious vision of his public purpose. "We shall answer to God, to history and to our conscience for the way in which we use these years," he promised the cheering masses before him.

Yet his whispered thoughts in private were of revenge, a battle to be fought and won, no quarter given. "We are all in it together," he reassured his lieutenants. "This is a war. We take a few shots and it will be over. We will give them a few shots and it will be over. Don't worry. I wouldn't want to be on the other side right now, would you?"

And so the stage of American political life was set for high tragedy. Power blinded by pride, unable to confront weaknesses.

HIS LOYAL FRIENDS, a shrinking circle of the faithful, saw Richard Nixon as a modern-day King Lear who raged magnificently at the storm around him. But Nixon lacked Lear's grandeur. Nixon's enemies cast him as Richard the Third, the King who was crippled by his own malevolence. But Nixon did not have the eloquence of that other Richard or his purity of evil purpose. Nixon was confused. Like Macbeth, who listened to the witches' prophesies and found comfort in their riddles. He was both brave in facing his peril but doomed by his blindness to it.

Shakespeare wrote the curse:

*He shall spurn fate, scorn death, and bear*
*His hopes 'bove wisdom, grace and fear;*
*And, you all know, security*
*Is mortal's chiefest enemy.*

For Richard Nixon, the false security was that "mandate of '72." He carried it with him like a shield, as though its magic powers would protect him from any attack by his enemies. As in the tale of that ancient Scottish king, it persuaded Richard Nixon that his throne was safe.

"People who did not accept the mandate of '72," he declared confidently, "who do not want the strong America that I want to build, who do not want the foreign policy leadership that I want to give, who do not want to cut down the size of this government bureaucracy . . . people who do not want these things naturally would exploit any issue, if it weren't Watergate, anything else, in order to keep the President from doing his job."

Lady Macbeth said it more succinctly: "What need we fear who knows it, when none can call our power to account?"

Now that his flaws are so evident, some in the audience indulge a certain self-righteousness at his fall. It seems just and satsifying and such good theater. But in this drama the spectators are victims too. The tragic awareness has settled not just upon the man, but upon the nation and its own sense of itself.

He was, as he liked to remind everyone, chosen overwhelmingly by all of us. And he won that remarkable election victory by espousing the popular values so common to our nation and its past. Hard work and ambition. Civil piety. A pugnacious sense of patriotism. A zest for rugged endeavors. Winning. He used public friends as emblems of what he believed — Billy Graham and the Washington Redskins, Bob Hope and John Wayne and General Patton. His lovely family, a perfect expression of virtuous striving.

And, of course, Richard Nixon has himself the ultimate example of how the tough-minded and talented can struggle upward in America, from the humblest home to positions of wealth and fame. He talked about that often in public and the familar story of hard work rewarded became part of what we knew about the man.

Then suddenly it seemed he was saying different things about himself, denials which sounded like unintended confessions.

"I made my mistakes," he said as fortune soured for him, "but in all of my years in public life, I have never profited, never profited from public service. I have earned every cent. And in all of my years of public life, I have never obstructed justice. And I think too that I could say that in my years of public life, that I welcome this kind of examination because people have got to know whether or not their President is a crook. Well, I am not a crook."

People listened to the quavering voice and the feeling spread that, of course, he was.

NOW THAT IT IS over, the climax seems so natural and inevitable, But it never looked that way as the drama unfolded. On the contrary, at a dozen different junctures it seemed that the President might save himself. Again and again, he was challenged by his enemies and begged by his allies to clear up the matter, to provide the complete factual explanations which would put it to rest. It was the one stroke which was beyond his vast power.

Each time he tried to slay the dragon, it grew another head and came charging back with new fire. Each of his solutions provided an added weapon against him. At one point, Nixon's despair and confusion produced a kind of desperate soliloquy recorded in the White House transcripts. "I don't know. Am I seeing something (unintelligible) that really isn't (unintelligible) or am I?"

Belatedly, he came forward in the spring of 1973 to announce that there was a stench in the White House—weeks after it was already obvious to the world. His disclosure was too late and not enough. In the fall, he arranged what he thought would be a final gesture of compromise turning over the tape-recorded evidence to his own selected arbiter. When that scheme ended in the dismissal of Special Prosecutor Archibald Cox, the move to impeach began in earnest.

A month later, Nixon made another drastic miscalculation of his own invincibility. By releasing his own income-tax returns, he thought that issue would be settled. But his tax returns only deepened the ugly portrait which events were drawing of him and propelled Congress one more step down the road it didn't want to take.

In the spring, the President made another miscalculation, perhaps the fatal one. Hemmed in by courts and congressional investigators, he chose the bold alternative of releasing to the public the transcripts of his rank private converstations, in which he plotted his survival with his closest aides. The coarse cynicism was too much, even for many of his friends.

The episode was like a classical moment of truth telling, in which the hero's illusions are confronted by reality and are overwhelmed by the contradictions. In public, he insisted on a pious view of himself. "I reject the cynical view," he declared at one point, "that politics is inevitably or even usually dirty business." Yet in private he thought it was naive to believe anything else. "Goldwater put it in context," Nixon told John Dean. "He said, 'Well, for Christ's sake, everybody bugs everybody else. We know that.' "

IN PUBLIC, he spoke of his ordeal as a fine period of testing, the crisis decision-making, which he relished throughout his turbulent political career. "I shall always remember this group tonight," Nixon told a Republican fund-raising banquet as the crisis deepened." Remember that when the going was tough, you hung in there. Remember that when the challenge was greatest, you didn't lose your faith. And if some of you think that, why does this challenge have to come to us, why do we have to endure, let me remind you that the finest steel has to go through the hottest fire. And, I can assure you, my friends, this room is full of fine steel tonight."

But in private this man of steel turned out to be malleable and tarnished. He did not sleep well during this period. He made late-night telephone calls to his two trusted mastiffs, Haldeman and Ehrlichman, seeking their reassurances. His family heard him playing the piano, alone, past midnight. His closest pal, Rebozo, took him on high-speed drives along California thruways for diversion.

"I'm so sick of this thing," the President confessed in a private moment of torment. "I want to get it done with and over. And I don't want to hear about it again."

While destiny closed on the king, his tragedy was enriched by the cast of minor characters around him who also fell. They included slick and cynical men grasping for a share of authority. Haldeman and Ehrlichman, crudely manipulating Nixon's presidential words and gestures like two Madison Avenue Pygmalions. John Dean, the facile scorpion whose poison served the President, then stung him. John Mitchell, smug and belligerent, a law-and-order man concealing his contempt for both. Ronald Ziegler, the comic mouthpiece who occasionally got confused himself about which was truth and which was lie.

When Nixon turned for help, these were the men who gathered for his inner councils, who, each in his own way, helped undo him. They were his friends of choice, men he selected because they shared his qualities or perhaps because he wished he shared theirs. The real enemy, it turned out, was all around him.

Beyond the inner circle, the subplots unraveled in a medley of personal disasters, muted moments of self-awareness for glib and purposeful young men whose opaque sense of values was shredded by Watergate.

CHARLES COLSON, White House tough guy, became a latter-day witness to Christ: "You've got to put your trust in other things than simply retaliating when you're hit."

Jeb Magruder, the loyal organization man who perjured himself to conceal the organization's crime, mused about the values which led to prison: "I would never say the country caused Watergate. Specific individuals are to blame. But there are certain values, certain characteristics and habits in this country — a design to get ahead, impatience. Our overwhelming legal structure creates in the average businessman, the average worker, a feeling that he has to do his share of shaving, whether it be on his income tax or his expense account."

And Egil Krogh, whose flinty sense of idealism produced a celebrated burglary, came to believe that the whole devastating scandal might be good for America, in the long run, even though it meant torment for him: "I have great hope that what is actually being done is a wonderful healing process whereby what this country represents and what it means are going to be more clearly understood."

As it happened, these minor players described their leader's flaws more clearly than he could himself. His last flourish was brave. Even his enemies conceded that. But it did not illuminate a character who had come to self-realization.

"They have tied me to a stake, I cannot fly," Macbeth roared as Macduff closed in with death. "But, bear-like, I must fight the course." So Nixon said stoutly: "I did an awful lot. I cut off one arm, then the other arm . . ." And he fought on.

Might he have saved himself, at one point or the other, simply by telling the whole truth? Early on, the public might have been forgiving, but his character would not allow it. His harshest critics insist that he could never afford to tell the truth because he was always guilty.

But Nixon's character dilemma rested on a more subtle problem than that. To tell the truth meant to reveal his weaknesses, to confess the White House fears and insecurities, to cut away the petty hatreds and tribal loyalties which led him deeper and deeper into the muck. How can a strong king confess that he is so frail? Indeed, each time the President showed a larger glimpse of his private self, it only made matters worse. People were repelled by what Nixon's men had done, but people were horrified when they saw the private man whom those men worked for.

THE THING that is completely misunderstood about Watergate," said Charles Colson, "is that everybody thinks the people surrounding the President were drunk with power . . . But it wasn't arrogance at all. It was insecurity. That insecurity began to breed a form of paranoia. We overreacted to the attacks against us and to a lot of things."

A tale of small men who did not belong in high places, who perhaps knew down deep that they did not belong, who wanted desperately to prove that their secret insecurities were wrong.

So the high tragedy is done, but only insensitive partisans can be self-righteous about the outcome. There was no moment of catharsis for the hero, no climactic scene when his rage dissolved into self-awareness.

His final disgrace was self-inflicted, a confession delivered two years too late to win any forgiveness from the political process. When he announced this week that he had indeed lied about it all, that he had in fact approved the crime, his belated candor produced an instant consensus across the spectrum of public opinion. He must go, whether by trial and conviction or by resignation. The most powerful of all leaders resisted that collective verdict briefly, then yielded to it, one final reflection of his insecure grasp of reality.

That moment of truth is for the nation itself, the audience which learned so painfully about its leader and, thus, about itself. If Richard Nixon was so evil, after all, can the rest of us be so good? If he was a mean-spirited leader, then who chose him?

Nixon's tragedy asks the most serious questions of democracy. If Nixon reflected authentic popular values, then perhaps he showed Americans a coarse picture of ourselves, one we would rather not face. Or, if he misled us and deceived us in his climb to power, then our democratic process failed at the most serious level.

"I think our country sinks beneath the yoke," Malcolm said of Macbeth's reign. "It weeps, it bleeds, and each new day a gash is added to her wounds."

What do we really know about the leaders whom we choose? What do we truly know about ourselves? The spectators depart with complicated feelings, a troubled mixture of satisfaction and self-doubt. They are hopeful that Richard Nixon's disgraced presidency has defined a new standard of public honor, but none can be entirely convinced.

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