

NYT
8-9-74

The Irony Of History

By James Reston

WASHINGTON, Aug. 8—In the long ironic history of America, events have kept unfolding contrary to the expectation of her greatest leaders and thinkers, but seldom has there been such an example of the irony and incongruity of political life as the case of Richard Milhous Nixon.

The journalists have now written his political obituary and passed him on to the historians—who will probably treat him more kindly—but he remains a tragic tangle of contradictions, and will have to be left in the end to dramatists, novelists, and psychologists.

There is something uncanny about the twists and accidents of this fantastic story, which may even baffle the mystery writers: The piece of tell-tale white tape placed the wrong way of the Watergate doors; the almost accidental discovery, in a throw-away question by a minor attorney, that the White House rooms had been bugged and the conversations recorded; the sudden appearance of two superb young reporters on the Washington Post; the appointment of two stern judges—John Sirica and Gerhard Gesell—to hear the cases; and the astonishing decision to raise, launder, and conceal campaign funds that weren't needed.

Constantly, the President and his men almost seemed to create the things they feared the most, by assuming the worst in everybody. Mr. Nixon's intent all along, he has explained, was to protect and strengthen the Presidency, but the result was to weaken it and revive the confidence and authority of the Congress.

He set an electronic trap to gather evidence for the prosecution of his enemies, and produced instead evidence for his own impeachment and conviction.

He campaigned for the Presidency on a platform of law and order, ap-

WASHINGTON

pealing for a "new morality" and the end of "permissiveness," and was brought down by the disorder, lawlessness, and moral squalor of his triumphant team.

He blamed his plight on his political enemies in the press and Congress, and asked the people to trust him and believe he had told the truth, but

he didn't even trust his own aides or lawyers, and was finally repudiated by most of his own supporters and by a Supreme Court that included four of his own appointees.

There seems no end to the irony of this drama, and so many odd and unexpected revelations and punishments have come about that it almost sustains the moral interpretation of history. The men who gave their loyalty to him rather than to their oath of office, hoping for personal success through their association with his power, were destroyed in the process—and they will never be the same even if he pardons them.

In his first inaugural address, Mr. Nixon said that perhaps the greatest crisis he faced upon taking office was "a crisis of the spirit" in America. And after he had won a second term by the largest margin in the history of the Presidency, his Administration summed up its achievement of the past:

"Perhaps his greatest achievement," the Administration said of Mr. Nixon, "was his success in helping the nation find an 'answer of the spirit' within itself. In the last four years, a new sense of calm and confidence has begun to grow up in America. A nation that had grown skeptical, accustomed to promises which outran reality, that has been learning to trust its institutions again . . . a nation that had become divided, with a waning sense of common purpose, has begun to pull itself back together. . . ."

John Ehrlichman made that theme more specific on Sept. 7, 1972. "After the history of this first term is written and you look back," he said, "you're going to see that, compared to other Administrations or by any other standards you'd want to apply, that it has been an extraordinarily clean, corruption-free Administration, because the President insists on that."

Nevertheless, perhaps the greatest irony of all is that the nation has come out of this nightmare reasonably united. By his tragic blunders, and lonely conspiracies, Mr. Nixon has finally kept his promise to the little girl with the sign in Ohio. He has "brought us together," not for his leadership and his tactics but against them.

It has been a terrible time, and but for this extraordinary combination of accidental disclosures, it might have been much worse, but the long agony has not been without its advantages. It took a civil war to get rid of slavery, two apocalyptic world wars to put American power behind peace and order in the world, a wasting economic depression to reform the social structure of America, and Vietnam and Watergate to bring excessive Presidential power under control.

There will be reforms now that will reform campaign financing, protect the privacy of our people, control the presumptions and power of White House officials, and bring the public's business more into the open. Nothing has been solved, but everything has been changed in subtle ways, and for the better. The tragedy has been Mr. Nixon, and the essence of the tragedy is that he was not faithful to his better instincts, or even to his trusting friends.