

# As He Never Saw Himself

By C. L. Sulzberger

ATHENS — The astonishing thing is that Richard Nixon was keenly aware of the importance of strong, moral leadership but that, paradoxically, he never seemed to apply to himself those standards he saw as necessary for others.

Thus, I can recall his telling me in 1964, during his political exile, that he thought President Lyndon Johnson "dangerously egocentric and power-hungry" and therefore considered it imperative "to have enough Republicans in Congress to keep the President from being corrupted by his own power."

When he had returned from the wilderness and moved into the White House, he said to me one day, May 19, 1969: "The real moral crisis in this country is the leadership crisis. The trouble is that the leaders, not the country as a whole, are weak and divided.

"By the leaders I mean the leaders of industry, the bankers, the newspapers. They are irresolute and un-understanding. The people as a whole can be led back to some kind of consensus if only the leaders can take hold of themselves."

Then, with particular reference to the Vietnam war and not in respect to

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## FOREIGN AFFAIRS

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an internal situation which then looked rosy, he said: "A great nation sometimes has to act in a great way. Otherwise it destroys its own moral fiber."

I was impressed by these words and by the long-range goals the President told me he had set himself. On Feb. 26, 1970, he said he was trying to lay the groundwork for a period long after he would be out of office, which neither of us, of course, could imagine would come as it did.

He explained he was working on an antipoverty program that would establish a national minimum wage; that he was drafting plans against pollution; that he wanted to face the world's birth control problem squarely; that he was working hard on international monetary affairs to avoid frequent currency crises; that he wished to establish a balance of "strategic sufficiency" with Russia and "bring China back into the normal international community."

In a subsequent talk March 8, 1971 he observed philosophically: "The older a nation and a people become, the more they become conscious of history and also of what is possible." He was referring to Vietnam, from which he was trying to extricate Americans.

He described this as "a war where there are no heroes, only goats. Our people became sick of Vietnam and supported our men there only in order to get them out—after this period of change in mood. Somewhere a great change has taken place." And, as the war was "ending," he added: "There has never been so great a challenge to U.S. leadership."

Thus, again this word, "leadership," remained constantly on his mind. He went on: "Frankly, I have far more confidence in our people than in the establishment. The people seem to see the problem in simple terms: 'By golly, we have to do the right thing.'"

Mr. Nixon reviewed his ideas on the U.S. destiny, on policy, on his dreams. He said with solemn assurance: "I want the American people to be able to be led by me, or by my successor, along a course that allows us to do what is needed to help the peace in this world."

Then he interjected something which sounds extraordinarily strange in the light of events: "I work here as if every day was going to be my last day. My theory is that you should never leave undone something that you will regret not having done when you had the power to do it."

In some kind of distorted mirror, it is all there: The President mustn't be corrupted by power; the crisis in leadership; a great nation must act greatly or destroy its moral fiber; countries become increasingly conscious of their history; the people warrant more confidence than the establishment. And finally, every day might be the last; don't leave undone things you might regret.

Everything is reflected, with sometimes stunning accuracy, except for one blank space. The man who gazed into that mirror had a blinding beam in his eye; he could not perceive his own image in the glass. His role, in the things he often so accurately discerned, was either warped or absent and he did not seem to know it. He lacked the gift so admired by Robert Burns, to see ourselves as other's see us.