

NYTimes

OCT 13 1975

The Second Comeback?

By William Safire

WASHINGTON—The nation's political reporters, heads crashing into their typewriters from boredom at having to write about the likes of Ford, Jackson, Rockefeller and Humphrey, have decided that their lives have become unbearable without Richard Nixon.

Accordingly, as if by orchestrated plot, Time magazine two weeks ago ran a color layout of Nixon in retirement; television newsmen swarmed all over his appearance the other day at a charity golf tournament, and The New York Times gave major front-page play to the picture. This week, Newsweek presents the smiling faces of Mr. and Mrs. Nixon on its cover, with a cover story on his "new life."

What's going on here? As I understood previous smoke signals from San Clemente, the Second Comeback was not scheduled to begin for a few years. Why are we riding back into the lists again so soon?

The answer seems to be that each one of Nixon's old adversaries is demanding that he return to public life immediately.

Take Alger Hiss, who helped launch Nixon's career, and whose appearance on a television "political obituary" of Nixon in the early sixties helped launch the First Comeback.

Convicted perjurer Hiss, without admitting any wrongdoing, has been re-admitted to the practice of law in Massachusetts. Simultaneously, some members of the New York Bar are insisting that Mr. Nixon not be permitted to resign from the bar without confessing to some crime. It is as if Mr. Hiss and the New York lawyers are conspiring to convince the public that Mr. Nixon is being treated unfairly, thus hastening his Second Comeback.

Or take the various Congressional committees whose chairmen are trying to parlay their horror at C.I.A. abuses into higher office for themselves. Senator Church, who takes the approach that there was no President in office from 1961 to 1968, realizes that the next time he poses holding a poison dart gun to his head, he will elicit a ho-hum from bored photographers. He desperately needs a picture poking his finger into the chest of Richard Nixon, with Witness Nixon cooperating as Nikita Khrushchev used to do.

Such a subpoena would give impetus to the Second Comeback. Serious students of government would shudder at the precedent, conjuring visions of an unpopular ex-President Harry Truman at the hands of a 1953 Joseph McCarthy, but Richard Nixon would play it for all it was worth. In great detail and with consummate piety, he

would defend the buggings, wire-tappings and burglaries recently revealed to have been acquiesced in by Presidents Johnson and Kennedy as necessary for national security. (Even the horrendous ones, which "some would call" impeachable offenses.)

In the long run, the biggest boost to the Second Comeback will be the proof of maltreatment made possible by the unconstitutional law passed by a furious Congress to seize and examine all of Richard Nixon's Presidential papers, including personal diaries. The Justice Department, in tandem with the lawyer who played court-secured tapes of White House meetings at a Georgetown cocktail party, is helping in the martyrdom necessary to a resurrection.

The revenge act of seizing Mr. Nixon's papers is a political atrocity, most civil libertarians silently agree; its only excuse is its target. It is that "bill of pains and penalties," directed at one man, specifically denied by our Con-

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stitution. It declares that his papers do not belong to him—in an action taken by Congressmen whose own public papers do not belong to the public, and which will be revived by judges whose papers done on public time by public clerks have always been held to be their private property.

Also helping the revivalists will be the Justice Department's well-publicized assertion that the Nixon papers should be seized because, after five years, Mr. Nixon might destroy some evidence of a crime. Of course, that reveals the unlawful law to be a "general warrant," blatantly unconstitutional, because our Government has always been denied the right to rifle any person's belongings in a fishing expedition for illegalities.

The Second Comeback strategists will surely be able to use this zealotry as proof of hypocrisy; especially when the Supreme Court holds that those who protested most loudly the invasion of privacy were the first to trample on constitutional protections in the case of the man they were determined to defeat.

With all these forces gathering to urge Mr. Nixon back into the arena; with the press, which long ago learned that nice guys don't sell newspapers, hanging breathless on every Nixon golf stroke; with Mr. Ex so anxious to prove once again that no man is defeated until he quits—what are the boys of the formerly burning deck to do?

Personally, I intend to resist this premature new wave of fascination with our fallen leader. It's all happening too soon. Why can't we hold off just a few years for the Second Comeback?