

What Caused Nixon's Downfall?

A Commentary

by Nicholas von Hoffman

Richard Nixon has been back in the news but enough time has passed since he left Washington so that no good is served by renewing old controversies. Without approving, defending or exculpating him, we have arrived at a moment when it is more important to try to understand what went on with him than to continue damning him.

A beginning can be made by noting that many foreigners were as confused by Richard Nixon's fall from power as Americans were by the Chinese cultural revolution. Both events were quite incomprehensible to outsiders. Europeans, especially, have been appalled and mystified at what appears to them to have been a sudden, savage and self-destructive dismemberment of an American President whom they regarded not as a vile criminal, but as an effective and creative statesman.

This dismemberment of Richard Nixon was accomplished in a manner vaguely parallel to the usages of the Chinese cultural revolution. Our wall posters, however, were the mass media. Never in our history has a President been so ferociously, and more important, so universally, assailed. How did this unique event occur?

The prevailing view is that Nixon was first caught out in the Watergate burglary by several enterprising journalists who were then joined by other media investigators until so much damaging evidence was amassed that an indignant Congress, a courageous judiciary and a shocked and angry people drove this malevolent man from power. If you believe that you also probably can be convinced that if you kiss a toad, it'll turn into a prince.

The first compromising Watergate stories caused no significant media reaction. Seven months or thereabouts were to go by while Nixon was being reelected before the media avalanche hit him. During all that time, the Washington press corps,

which was indeed as hostile to Nixon as he often accused them of being, were kept on the leash by their editors and publishers and required to write the kind of shallow, perfunctory drivel they are again writing about this year's elections.

What set of circumstances or events caused the owners of the media to let slip their war dogs, have at Nixon and provide the background crowd noise needed to decapitate the man? Only historians, provided they ever

Poster

get access to the right material, will be able to formulate some answers. But there are some ways of looking at Richard Nixon's position about the time of his second inauguration that suggest who or what may really have gotten rid of the man.

- Congress. A modern President can, to a very large degree, rule without Congress as long as he goes through the outward form of pretending it is an equal branch of government. Nixon didn't do that, so he had built up a body of resentment on Capitol Hill that, other circumstances being right, would use the failing residual powers of Congress to bush-whack him.

- The Pentagon, the CIA and the State Department. The available evidence indicates that all three had come to think him a dangerous man, not only because they had been cut out of the decision making, but also because they thought he was moving toward military disaster for us in his negotiations with the Russians.

- The bureaucracy. Shortly after his reelection, Nixon demanded the resignation of the 2,000 top bureaucrats in Washington. At one stroke he threatened every structure in the government and invited large-scale disloyalty toward him. Historians will want to test the hypothesis that a frightened bureaucracy defended itself by passing huge amounts of compromising information to the media and Congress.

- The attempt to destroy the de-

partmental and cabinet systems. Nixon also announced he was creating a super Cabinet that would run the government directly out of the White House. The vast and elaborate departmental and regulatory system is the indispensable prop to every important interest group in the country from oil refining to social work. By this act he threatened the stability, continuity and control of these great fused nodules of public and private interest or baronies, as political philosopher Marcus Raskin, to whom I'm indebted for many of these ideas, calls them.

What Richard Nixon contemplated doing was actually running the government, something no President in seven decades had attempted. To do it he'd not only alienated the government he proposed to run but he was also planning to do it in such a way as to cause every interest group to worry that its long held privileges and influence were in danger, thanks to this new centralization of power.

The President to be elected next fall may succeed in this kind of "streamlining" of government. Certainly much of the reform talk suggests that's the direction we're going in, but Nixon couldn't bring it off. He didn't have enough trustworthy people to put in pivotal positions, nor did he have a large personal following, à la George Wallace, that he might have used to intimidate opponents. As the smarter observers said at the time of his landslide reelection, his support was a thousand miles wide and five inches deep.

Now we have a possible explanation for the man's fall. Secretive, suspicious and painfully unloveable, he made no move to reassure anybody, not even members of the ruling elite—many of whom were inclined to regard him as an unpleasant grind and a vulgar parvenue. The barons and the baronies made ready to protect themselves.

To topple him, one more element was needed: the media storm to incite the millions to eject the crook, the tax cheat, the ultimate Fallen American.