

The Nixon Tragedy



— Arthur Hoppe

THE MOST TRAGIC figure of our times has long been, for me, Mr. Nixon. And now Woodward and Bernstein have written the end of that tragedy in their new book, "The Final Days."

It is an ugly ending. From the portions of the book that have been leaked to the press, Mr. Nixon is pictured during his last days in the White House as a drunken, raving, sexless paranoid, alternately screaming and sobbing, ranting and begging, and pounding his fists on the floor.

The Nixon haters will doubt that this is the end. They have buried him time and again before. And each time he has somehow risen to haunt the corridors of power. Even after Watergate, they say, there he was in Peking, conferring with world leaders as an equal.

But this time, I think, the stake has been driven through his heart. I am sorry for the way it was done.

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IT IS a question of respect. To me, Mr. Nixon's one goal in life was to win respect — not fame, fortune or love, but respect.

I covered him through four campaigns. I talked to him privately on only three occasions. Yet each time I did I was reminded of when I was seven. We had a club. There was one kid we wouldn't let in. We didn't hate him. It was just that he was the kind of kid you wouldn't let play unless it was his ball.

Finally, with childish cruelty, we put him through an elaborate initiation. Then we disbanded the club, formed another and offered to initiate him

again. The third time he fled home in tears, shouting, "I'll show you!"

So I thought of the young Mr. Nixon — the bench warmer for the football team, the awkward boy at parties in the wrong clothes with no capacity for small talk, the friendless grind. "I'll show you!" he must have said.

And he did. He was a highly intelligent man, a masterful politician and a brilliant statesman. By 1972 he had won the respect of most of the world. How jealously he guarded that respect! How fearful he was that his enemies would somehow take it from him! What a grand fatal flaw for a tragic hero!

So came Watergate and the fall. But even in Watergate, the evil was magnificent enough to be suitable to high tragedy, for it involved the very foundations of our government.

Perhaps the Nixon haters were right. Perhaps he might have risen again in time, a tragic figure hounded unfairly from office by his unscrupulous enemies. Perhaps he would have regained the respect he had lost.

But now the Dorian Gray-like portrait painted by Woodward and Bernstein has ended his search for respect.

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IT IS a seamy, sleazy, sordid ending, totally unsuitable to high tragedy. It is as though Hamlet were asked to rise drunkenly from the dead and tell a dirty joke at the final curtain. It is more designed to evoke pity and revulsion than respect.

And yet, if I am right about Mr. Nixon, no more tragic ending could be devised.