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The Nixon groupie who never says die

WASHINGTON — (NEA) — When Rabbi Baruch Korff began his curious defense of Richard Nixon in 1973, one was reminded of Woodrow Wilson's advice regarding the proper response to zealots: the wise thing to do is to encourage them to hire a hall and talk to the people, for "nothing chills nonsense like exposure to air."

Three years later the rabbi's campaign has indeed become frozen irrelevance, tiresome in repetition and noteworthy only for its value as a semi-arrogant remnant of what so soon seems an impossible past. Yet his campaign continues. It is an effort now beyond the public sympathy, now permanently relegated to the fringes of decorum — yet it goes on. In a way, the rabbi's endless promotion of the former President has given a bad name to compassion.

Korff surfaced again at the Republican National Convention. He was there to advise anyone who listened that Richard Nixon was "the greatest president of the 20th century." He admonished the Republicans for omitting the name Nixon from all but private conversation. He said they would be sorry. A judgment day is coming. "I believe the American people will forgive the sins of Watergate."

It is increasingly painful to hear him. It is worse to view his performance. A short and pompous man, full of himself, he is a living memorial to his champion, hence convinced of the need for personal stature and regal wisdom. He dresses in black, rarely smiles, and when speaking to the subjects he forms sentences with the expectation they are being recorded for all time. "The architects of Watergate," he intones solemnly, "were the Democratic hierarchy."

Nobody is listening now, of course. But is not hard to recall when they were. In the last months of 1973 and throughout 1974 the rabbi was something of a folkhero patriot. Richard Nixon could not get the Republican committee to work on his behalf, and even the White House was unable to muster visible public appreciation. Then came Korff, a Ukrainian Jew with a proclivity for fighting lost causes. Embracing Nixon, he became an instant celebrity, and he loved it — every interview, every appearance, every glint of the Kleig lights.

Nixon loved it also, of course. Korff held gala gatherings of support for the Watergater. Jerry Ford showed up at

one to say he believed "Richard Nixon's place in history already stands secure." Cabinet members and military generals packed affairs Korff sponsored. Millionaires and media haters were there. And everyone urged the President of the United States to fight the laws and statues he was sworn to uphold.

Nixon did not attend the affairs. But on one occasion he called in by phone to address the adulators. Korff treated the moment with supreme reverence. Had anyone present sneezed they'd have been sent to the rack. Nixon said he would not quit, and that "we are going to continue until we win." Then a band began playing, and the cheers of the audience followed. At length, after the tumult had ended, Korff put his mouth against the phone receiver and said: "We love you dearly."

Korff's love has since become a crushing thing. One suspects even Nixon has tired of it. It cannot do the former President's shredded image any good to have somebody going about reminding the world of the days of shame. Many of Nixon's old friends agree. They view Korff as an opportunist, stuffy as hell, and as much concerned with his own reputation as that of the 37th president.

And yet, even if he wanted, Nixon could not afford to brush the rabbit back into obscurity. Korff has raised \$335,000 in cash and \$165,000 in pledges to ease the legal expenses at San Clemente. This is a friendship, then, paid for by one party and sold by the other. Mortifications or not, the partnership has been profitable all around.

So Rabbi Korff will continue his act. He will go on showing up wherever there is an available ear, purse or television camera. He will work to his last breath to convince America of its lack of heart. And if he cannot change Richard Nixon's place in history, never mind; he will at least have made a bizarre place for himself.