Like the Televised Frost Interviews, His Memoirs Are an Exercise in Hopeless Self-Justification

Nixon Drama: Pathetic, Not Tragic

BY JAMES RESTON JR.

Nixon's life would appear to have elements of a Greek or Shakespearean tragedy, for in both modes, a figure of great prominence often fell from power and propriety to disgrace. If Nixon were able to hire himself a tragic tragedian, the playwright would know that the real drama, the real climax, lies in the fall. The humiliated, the men was always present, but they often complained more are what Virginia Woolf calls "the fertile fact," the presence of great prominence often fell from power and exile, and beyond these, the Enlightenment. He would know that Shakespeare in "Richard II" emphasized how poor and weak a king Richard was only in the first two acts. His abuses were accepted without complaint. The action rose in the last three acts, as the king's authority is challenged, as the issue of the divine right of kings is pitted against the excesses of intolerable rule. King Richard is pathetically reduced to the lot of a commoner and eventually murdered.

During the six weeks I spent last year watching Nixon during the taping of the David Frost interviews, Nixon appeared to preside over a tiny micro-Presidency; he was doing so in the first Watergate program, the television audience started large, and grew in the course of the 90 minutes to an unbelievable 50 million viewers, competitive that week in the Nielsen ratings with "Happy Days." Millions of Americans desperately wanted to see Nixon lose. Indeed, he had to lose in order to make us content with our recent history. As he was doing so in the first Watergate program, the television audience started large, and grew in the course of the 90 minutes to an unbelievable 50 million viewers, competitive that week in the Nielsen ratings with "Happy Days."

But, with Nixon's recently published memoirs, there will be no loser. Nixon is the total victor already, for his content is complete. There is no one to answer back, no one to prod him to greater confession, or broader apology. The memoirs are like the resignation speech, on the night of Aug. 8, and the farewell speech, on the night of Aug. 20. This Is sad and poignant, but is Richard Nixon really a tragic figure?

All such inquiries must begin with Aristotle. The finest form of tragedy, Aristotle writes in his "Poetics," has a complex plot in which the hero, enjoying great reputation and prosperity, passes from happiness into misery. The spectacle of the fall must evoke in the observer both fear and pity, and provide for him a catharsis or purge, which is pleasurable and illuminating about the estate of man.

Clearly, Nixon maintains his power to evoke envy in many Americans. His appearance with David Frost on television created the air of a duel, from which a winner and a loser would emerge. Would Frost break Nixon? Or would the Englishman be a patsy?

Nixon's valet, Manalo Sanchez, would arrive at the presidential China, so obviously drafted, to protect Nixon's seclusion. For biographers and historians alike, the farewell speech is the most important Nixon ever gave. In Shakespeare's "Richard II," when the king is pathetically reduced to the lot of a commoner, he speaks words that might apply to a graceful idealization of Richard Nixon:

Oh that I were as proud as my grief
Or lesser than my name.

Or that I could forget
What I have done.

This is China," Nixon continued. "There are 700 million