Nixon In Exile: A Tragedy?

By JAMES RESTON JR.

Apart from what one feels about Richard Nixon now, much in his current situation as the most humiliated figure in our political history is poignant, and much in his memoirs (published last week in The Observer) is of literary and dramatic interest. Indeed, in these years of exile, dramatic standards are more relevant than are any new facts his memoirs might or might not add. The only facts that matter any more are those Virginia Woolf calls "the trivial fact," the fact that reveals character rather than event. The Nixon character is the last mystery of Watergate, infinitely more interesting and more important than whether he destroyed 18 minutes of taped evidence.

In the years since his resignation, and in the years he has left, Nixon's life at its end 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 prosperity to disgrace. If Nixon were able to hire himself a captive tragedian, the playwright might know that the real drama, the real climax, lies in the fall, the humiliation, the exile, and beyond these, the enlightenment. He would know that Shakespeare in Richard III emphasized how poor and weak a king Richard was only in the first two acts; his abuses were accepted without complaint. The action lies in the last three acts, as the king's authority is challenged, as the issue of 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.

In 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 president in a dumbed people. At every taping session with Frost, Nixon's helper, Manolo Sanchez, would arrive at the set, 10 miles north of San Clemente, with the presidential china, so the boss could have his morning coffee from a cup that was president. The compliment of Secret Servicemen was always present, but they often complained about how boring it was to be assigned to protect Nixon's seclusion.

And so much in this unique drama depends on the perceptions of the viewer, I remember the direction of the Nixon interviews, John Winther, relating the tale of his visit to Nixon's office several months before the Frost taping was to begin. Then it was thought that the tapes would be in Nixon's office, and John joked with Nixon about how he might brighten up the bland office for the interviews by hanging a Danish flag on the wall. Nixon had laughed and then had walked over to a globe of the world. He spun it vigorously, and when it stopped, he placed his finger on Denmark as if, as the geography teacher, he felt Winther might need a refresher. His lesson did not end there.

"This is China," Nixon continued. "There are 700 million people living there, as opposed to 100 million in the Middle East." He span the globe to the Middle East. "And 250 million in Russia. Where do you suppose most of the troubles in our world come from?"

In an office without cells his memoirs might or might not add. The two buildings behind, which made up the office complex, were little more than overtaxed mobile homes, well-landscaped. Parked at the door was a golf cart with tape and prospects to disgrace.

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I asked the lady at the front desk if there were any Nixon souvenirs about. She went into the bar and was gone for quite a while. When she returned, she handed me two boxes of postcards, one labeled "President Nixon" and the other "President Nixon In Exile: A Tragedy". The two buildings behind, which made up the office complex, were little more than overtaxed mobile homes, well-landscaped. Parked at the door was a golf cart with tape and prospects to disgrace.

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