

Nixon In Exile: A Tragedy?

By JAMES RESTON JR.
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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 what Virginia Woolf calls "the fertile 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 18½ 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 would 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 II emphasized how poor and weak a king Richard was only in the first two acts. His abuses were accepted without complaint. The action rises 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 to a dozen people. At every taping session with Frost, Nixon's butler, 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 fit for a president. The complement 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 director of the Nixon interviews, John Winther, relating the tale of his visit to Nixon's office several months before the Frost tapings were to begin. Then it was thought that the tapings 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 spun the globe to the Middle East. "And 250 million in Russia. Where do you suppose most of the troubles in our world come from?"

*Oh that I were as great as my grief
Or lesser than my name
Or that I could forget
What I have been
Or not remember
What I must be now.*

— Shakespeare's Richard II

The two buildings behind, which made up the office complex, were little more than oversized mobile homes, well-landscaped. Parked at the door was a golf cart with a fringed canopy, and on the front of it, in cheery orange and yellow script, were the words, "President Nixon." In an office I was asked to wait, and I spent the time looking at the vivid, framed color pictures on the wall: Nixon and Mao, Nixon and Brezhnev, Nixon and Sadat amid the splendor of a Mideast palace. Why couldn't an American president have better accommodations, Nixon once asked an aide after a Middle East visit.

At length, Ken Khachigian, who was handling the arrangements for the interviews, appeared. He gave me a brief, dutiful tour of the premises. He showed me the patio that once "teemed with press," (now the silence was deafening), the doors that once led to Haldeman's and Ehrlichman's offices, the empty offices where occasionally volunteers come to help out with the mail. Around on the back lawn, Khachigian expressed some hope the University of Southern California might now set up a Nixon library, but, of course, it was still very fuzzy what, if any, papers Nixon could deposit there. The case was still in court. It was all quite embarrassing, and I hastened to leave.

On the way back I stopped briefly at the San Clemente Inn to see the pathetic little "Nixon Museum." A small enclosure in the lobby of the hygienic motel, it consists primarily of campaign buttons from all his races, laid on velvet in glass cases. A bronze bust, not very reminiscent of the real man, conveying none of the strength or the weakness of his remarkable visage — dead, lifeless bronze — presided over the small space. The time had come for better sculptors and painters who were intent on capturing the essence of this personality, just as the time had come for the biographers and the memoirists. In the future there would be a need for special Nixon commemoratives.

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 a white, finger-smudged matchbook. Its simple gold

