

# The Age of Nixon

By Anthony Lewis

BOSTON, Aug. 9—In watching tragedy, the audience finds release—catharsis—for its own fear and pain. So the Greek dramatists taught us. But to meet their definition of tragedy, the hero had to change during the drama. Like Oedipus, he came to understand the destiny imbedded in his character. He accepted reality, and so he expiated the wrongs of the past.

What was so sad about the final moments of Richard Nixon's public life was that he denied his country the empathy and the release it desired. For he made clear that he had not changed. He was still trying to escape reality.

The only reason he gave for his resignation from the Presidency was that he had lost his "political base." The unwary might have thought that, as in a parliamentary system, the legislature had forced him out because of policy or partisan differences. That implication was surely intended.

He could not bring himself to mention that a vast majority of Congress and the country had decided he was guilty of high crimes and misdemeanors. Instead, he tried to devalue the great constitutional process through which the country has just so nobly passed.

A few days before, The Times of London had suggested that he would regain some "moral stature" in resigning by accepting responsibility for his wrongs and thus preventing any later claim of unfairness. He so pointedly failed to do this that Senator Edward Brooke, having heard the speech, disavowed his own proposal that Mr. Nixon be given immunity from criminal prosecution.

"I have always tried to do what was best for the nation," Mr. Nixon said, expressing his regret that he would not be in the Oval Office "working on your behalf." That from the man whose own taped transcripts show an overwhelming interest in power and no visible concern for the public good.

## ABROAD AT HOME

He spoke of "justice." That from a man who has virtually confessed himself a common criminal. He spoke of his "sense of kinship with each and every American." That from a man who called his Secretary of the Treasury a "candy-ass" because he would not join in using the tax system to punish citizens labeled political enemies.

In his last remarks to the White House staff, he said again and again that no man or woman in his Administration had profited from the public till. That from the man whom the Internal Revenue Service found had used \$67,388 in Government money for his private houses and in four years underpaid his taxes by \$418,229.

Pity for Richard Nixon: yes. And charity. But it would be quite another thing to forget the cruelty he inflicted on so many individuals and the dam-

age he did his country. He has not sought expiation, and he is not a tragic hero. He left national political life as he entered it: debasing the language and doing violence to truth.

Forgetfulness would be the less justified because Mr. Nixon was not alone. While the myriad crimes and abuses of Watergate were being committed, persons of reputation stood by him. How could George Shultz participate in conversations as demeaning as those that have now been published and continue to serve a President of such character? How could a man as respected as Gen. Alexander Haig once was close his senses to the reek of criminality?

Nor is it only officials who share responsibility. Richard Nixon has been in public life for 25 years, a period that could fairly be called the age of Nixon in our politics. It truly says something about a country, about all of us, that we could for so long accept a politics of hate and slander, of public-relations emptiness.

But change is at hand now. The process of impeachment achieved a political catharsis as genuine as any that a nation is likely to have. And in the person of Gerald Ford, the United States just may have proved itself once again to have the greatest of national assets: good luck.

When President Ford took the oath of office and said his few words of reassuring modesty, it was as if a cloud had lifted. Words once more had a simple, direct meaning. Mr. Ford rightly asked for kindness toward Mr. Nixon and his family. But his thoughts and his prayers could not more boldly have drawn the necessary line between past and future.

"Purge our hearts of suspicion and of hate," he said. "Our Constitution works." "Our great Republic is a government of laws and not of men." And, not least: "Truth is the glue that holds governments together."

There is reason to hope that, in more than the personal sense, the age of Nixon has ended.



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