

SOMETHING WRONG

I stood there with my wife, Patty, and son Wendell, puzzled. This night—election night, 1972—should have been the proudest of my life. Certainly a Victory Party was called for—the landslide reelection of Richard Nixon to the Presidency of the United States.

Nothing was amiss about the setting. The high-ceilinged ornate ballroom of Washington's Shoreham Hotel was packed with distinguished gray-suited men, elegant ladies in rich furs. Yet the picture was out of focus. Something wrong.

I stood there thinking that, unlike any celebration I had attended in twenty years in politics, there was no air of triumph here. The faces before us were unsmiling, looking, in fact, disappointed and even imposed upon. Around the big boards where the continuing returns were posting record-breaking margins for Nixon, there was scarcely a ripple of excitement.

My mind went back to the comparable scene four years before at the Waldorf in New York. What a contrast! That 1968 Victory Party had been alive, high drama indeed. I recalled the scene so vividly—the Waldorf ballroom jammed with eager young people who had worked so hard for months to oust the Democrats. All that long night as the brass ring neared their grasp, the excitement mounted until the sweet smell of victory filled the air. As the vote

count on the big boards edged up, precinct by precinct, how they *oo*hed and sighed and laughed and slapped one another on the back and roared their approval.

But tonight?

Patty turned to me. "What's wrong, Chuck? You're so quiet."

"I don't *know* what's wrong. Just exhausted, I guess." With a nod and a gesture I indicated the throng pushing and shoving four deep around the bar. "The only thing these people seem to care about is the free booze."

"Let's walk around," Wendell suggested. "See what people are saying." In only two weeks as a campaign volunteer, Wendell had learned a lot. Now he sought further insights to take back to his political-science course at Princeton.

And I wanted insights, too.

In the VIP area the comments were griping ones. . . . Where was Nixon? Shouldn't their \$25,000 contributions entitle them to at least a handshake on election night? Then we were cornered by Senator Bob Dole, the Republican national chairman. Angrily he jabbed his finger at me: "The President didn't even mention the Committee in his speech."

After that a group of dour-faced party hangers-on surrounded us. "I want to see you about my job," one old stalwart said unsmilingly as he clutched my arm. None of the other senior White House staffers were there, and in minutes I was being swamped with requests.

No, I wasn't imagining the sour mood. But something was also wrong in me. My insides were as deadened as the air in the room and the slow beat of the music. My lack of exhilaration made no sense. Being part of electing a President was the fondest ambition of my life. For three long years I had committed everything I had, every ounce of energy to Richard Nixon's cause.

Nothing else had mattered. We had had no time together as a family, no social life, no vacations. So why could my tongue not taste the flavor of this hour of conquest?

Just then my little beeper, the radio receiver which I snapped to my belt whenever I was out of telephone reach, went off. There was a shrill whistle. Then as I lifted the gadget to my ear, came the command, "Colson, Colson, report to the White House operator."

It was the President. He wanted me at once in his office, the operator said when I called in. A limousine sped Patty, Wendell, and me through the darkness, past nearly deserted Rock Creek Park, to downtown Washington, and at last through the iron gates to the White House grounds.

A blue-suited officer, his braid glittering in the glow of floodlights, snapped a salute and told me that Mr. Nixon was in his "working" office in the Executive Office Building, called the E.O.B. Nixon used the traditional Oval Office in the west wing of the White House chiefly for formal meetings, preferring to work in the quiet intimacy of the denlike office in the E.O.B. across the alleyway. This mammoth gray Victorian structure bristling with gingerbread, arches, and turrets had once held the entire State and War Departments, but now housed only the White House staff.

When we got there we found one lone Secret Service agent in the marble-floored hallway. He waved us in and watched while I deposited Patty and Wendell in my office next to the President's. "I'll only be a few minutes," I told them. "Then we'll go home to bed."

Back in the darkened hall, the Secret Service agent spoke softly: "He's waiting for you, Mr. Colson." I swung open the ten-foot-high door to find Richard Nixon reclining in his favorite easy chair, smiling and puffing contentedly on his pipe. The President was wearing the light-blue checked sport jacket he always slipped on

when in the privacy of his office and I blinked a little at the eye-blurring combination of blue checks with the dark blue pinstripe of his trousers.

A few feet away Bob Haldeman, Nixon's chief of staff, was sitting at a small antique table poring over election returns. His back was to the door and he never looked up as I walked in.

The President greeted me with a big grin and, "Good job, boy, good job." Haldeman still did not look up.

"Sit down, Chuck, and have a drink with me," he said. The President rang for Manola, his Cuban valet, who scurried in with two Scotch and sodas.

Haldeman never drank, and I imagined Nixon had been anxiously awaiting my arrival. "Here's to you, Chuck. Those are your votes that are pouring in, the Catholics, the union members, the blue-collars, *your* votes, boy. It was your strategy and it's a landslide!" Nixon lifted his glass to me and then gulped almost half its contents in one swallow.

"The way the votes are piling up, you are going to top sixty-one percent, Mr. President. That's a record," I said and then reminded him of a modest bet we'd made the day before.

Haldeman was still busy totaling up numbers, once snatching the phone beside him to berate his young assistant, Larry Higby, for not providing the latest figures. Watching Bob's scowling face, I saw a replay of the faces at the Shoreham. From Bob's attitude, I could have thought we were losing the election.

"Bob and I were just talking before you came in, Chuck," the President rambled on. "It was ten years ago almost to the day that they wrote us off. We were 'dead' in California, finished, all through. Look at us now—on top—biggest vote ever," he chorled. "I guess we showed 'em! Right?" He smacked a fist into his outstretched palm.

Nixon drank again, emptying his glass, then went into the large lavatory off the far side of the room. I turned to the grim-lipped Haldeman. "What's eating you?"

Bob's eyes, blue and steely cold, darted up from his papers, meeting mine for the first time, a deep frown on his forehead. His short crew cut seemed to bristle, too. "I'm trying to add the actual figures—don't be giving him your guesses," he snapped.

Haldeman, I assumed, was tired. Perhaps he was also resenting the fact that I was sharing this moment of victory with the President. Of course there were always petty jealousies in the White House.

"What's wrong, Chuck? Why aren't you smiling and celebrating?" Nixon asked, returning to his chair.

"I guess I'm a bit numb, sir."

"This is a night to remember. Have another drink. Let's enjoy this." I had always followed Nixon's orders, but you can't order somebody to be happy.

The President then began composing one draft after another of a telegram to send to his vanquished opponent, Senator George McGovern. It was now close to two in the morning. McGovern had conceded hours earlier. By the rules of the game Nixon's response was long overdue. Yet as fast as the words rolled off his tongue, he would reject them. "How can I say something nice after he kept comparing me to Hitler?"

Haldeman handed him a draft written by another aide. Nixon scanned it. "No, I won't say that." He flung the sheet of paper across the little table between Haldeman and myself.

That he could show no charity in this hour of his greatest triumph dramatized the paradox of Richard Nixon. In 1960 evidence suggested that the cliff-hanger election had been stolen from him. "Demand a recount," his aides urged. But Nixon had refused: it

would create uncertainty, be bad for the country, and it was his job to help unite the electorate behind the man who defeated him. Noble in defeat, he was now without grace in victory.

Time and again I had seen the President show rare courage when others around him shrank in fear. For this he had won my deepest admiration. Since I had come to respect the President for what he was in his best moments, I learned to accept him for what he was in his worst. I suppose loyalty, like love, creates its own image of what we see.

If someone had peered in on us that night from some imaginary peephole in the ceiling of the President's office, what a curious sight it would have been: a victorious President, grumbling over words he would grudgingly say to his fallen foe; his chief of staff angry, surly, and snarling; and the architect of his political strategy sitting in a numbed stupor. Yes, the picture was out of focus. If this was victory, what might these three men have looked like in defeat?

Nixon told Manola to find us something to eat. That meant waking up a couple of the White House stewards. Shortly before 3:00 AM they appeared, sleepy-eyed, carrying three plates of fried eggs and ham. I wished that they had brought some food for Patty and Wendell next door, but decided not to trouble the tired stewards further. The President was chattering on about one Senate race after another, on such a reminiscing kick that we could easily be there until dawn. How could I rescue Patty and Wendell?

The answer came in a report from Haldeman's assistant: both the Associated Press and United Press wire services had shut down for the night; there would be no more vote totals until morning. That welcome news plus my drooping eyelids must have convinced the President to call it a night.

As we were leaving, Mr. Nixon paused at the top of the long

flight of gray cement steps leading to the driveway. Directly in front of us the chalk-white mansion rose up majestically in the darkness. “Chuck,” he said, “I just want you to know—I’ll always be. . . .”

Knowing how hard it always was for him to show emotions, I interrupted. “Thank you, Mr. President. Tomorrow will be a good day.”

With that he turned and started down the steps, with the Secret Service agent in front of him, glancing mechanically from side to side. I stood for a moment, watching the Thirty-seventh President of the United States, now with the greatest mandate in history by which to govern, slowly descending before me. Lights still burning in a few windows cast an orange glow over the green shrubs and velvety lawns. The night air was clear. In the background rose the Washington Monument, tall and proud, a sight which had never ceased to thrill me. But tonight not even this could penetrate the deadness inside me. . . .

The shrill sound kept hammering at my eardrums. I pulled the blanket from over my head, rubbed my eyes and stared at the clock—8:00 AM The ringing came from the White House phone beside my bed. I nearly knocked the phone off the nightstand fumbling for the receiver.

“Chuck, sorry, but *he* wants you in his office right away.” It was Steve Bull, the President’s scheduler and office aide-de-camp.

“Come off it, Steve; I’ve only had four hours of sleep. The election is over, and the top of my head is coming off.”

“Sorry, but the President wants you.”

A few shaving nicks and two cups of coffee later, I was on my way, blurry-eyed, with a throbbing head. When I arrived at the White House, the senior staff was already assembling in the

Roosevelt Room for a meeting with the President. *If the President wanted to thank us*, I thought to myself, *why doesn't he do it by letting us sleep late?* He ought to be walking on air; the morning vote totals were confirming our most optimistic projections—a record-breaking 49 states for Nixon, 61 percent of the total vote.

The assembled staff, most red-eyed like myself, rose to their feet when the President entered, applauding enthusiastically. Nixon smiled and waved for us to be seated. The clapping continued and the chief dropped his eyes for a moment, gripping the back of his chair at the end of the long conference table. Richard Nixon looked fresh, surprisingly rested, in fact. He was precise, crisp, and to the point.

“I believe men exhaust themselves in government without realizing it,” he began. Turning to a favorite period in history, the mid-nineteenth century in England, Nixon recalled that Disraeli defeated Gladstone immediately after Gladstone’s great work in reforming the British government. Gladstone was “an exhausted volcano,” Disraeli had charged. The parallel as Nixon meant it was clear: We had done well, but were we exhausted volcanoes with no fire left for the battles ahead?

The President turned to Bob Haldeman, who was glaring sternly at the rest of the staff. “Bob will explain the procedures we’ve worked out. We need new blood, fresh ideas. Change is important.”

Why is he doing this? I wondered, as my eyes quickly scanned the still figures around the table.

“You are my first team,” he continued, “but today we start fresh for the next four years. There are great goals to be achieved for the country and we must not lose a day. Bob, you take over.” With that, he smiled and headed for the door leading to the hall. It took a long painful moment for us to realize the President was

through—it had taken exactly twelve minutes—and the applause, more restrained now, had scarcely begun when he was gone.

Haldeman was blunt. “I will expect resignations from every member of the staff to be delivered to the staff secretary by noon on Friday, from each of you and each person who works for you. Also submit memos stating your preferences for new assignments.” He cleared his throat, paused, and added, “That is, of course, the courtesy customarily extended a President at the start of each new Administration.” He then passed out envelopes filled with detailed instructions and forms.

His last point did not altogether take the sting out of the chilling announcement. *Okay, Bob*, I thought, *everyone appointed by a President serves at his pleasure. But why this, so soon and so crudely?* I had forbidden my staff any vacations during the election year, promising them instead a rousing celebration, good vacations, and help in finding better positions if we won. Now, according to Haldeman, I was to convene all thirty men and women in my office and inform them they were to look for new jobs.

I told myself that I didn’t care. I had already told the President in July that I was leaving his staff after the election to return to my law practice. Even so, I felt surprisingly letdown. Perhaps I had thought that the out-of-focus picture of the night before would disappear with the bright morning light. It was a shock to encounter the same sourness in this room.

Men stared at one another in disbelief, dazed by the suddenness of it all. Then the grumbling began, first only murmurs of surprise, soon everyone seemed to be talking at once as anger replaced incredulity. Herb Klein, the longtime loyal press aide who had been with Nixon for twenty-five years, quietly left, his head bowed and the bounce gone from his short quick steps.

Just as the din in the room was reaching a crescendo, Steve Bull summoned me to the President's formal Oval Office. Ill at ease, Mr. Nixon explained that I was not in the same category with the others. Before he left that day for Key Biscayne, he said, he wanted to ask me again to reconsider my resignation.

I convened my staff and assured them that notwithstanding the formality of submitting letters of resignation I would assist each of them in locating the right positions in the new Administration, and told them to take vacations.

But the mood was subdued. The victory that had come as the result of such long months of grueling work now seemed tasteless.

I saw Nixon off that afternoon, watching as *Marine One*, the Presidential helicopter, lifted gracefully from the South Lawn. Then I headed back to my office, walking slowly through the west wing. It was always calm when the President was traveling because half the staff went with him. Normally there would be a few secretaries typing, workmen in the halls repairing lights, a few staffers standing around chatting. But this afternoon there was only one lonely uniformed policeman standing at the open door of the Oval Office. The emptiness was unreal, the stillness haunting—as if some deadly plague had swept through. . . . I could almost hear the muffled drumroll of distant artillery.

The President had spoken of great goals, and at long last they seemed within reach. For the first time in years, there was stability in the country. The war in Vietnam was nearly over and we had won an overwhelming vote of public confidence. What was it that was now unsettling us, invading our midst, right here at the heart of governmental power?

Bringing the question closer to home, what was spoiling inside of me? Just tired? Or was there something very wrong?