LETTER TO THE NATION'S NUMBER ONE SPORTS FAN

Pilgrim Church, Duluth February 3, 1974 Dr. Royal F. Shepard, Jr.

My dear Mr. President:

As the nation's number one sport's fan, you frequently use the language of athletics, and especially of football, to convey your point of view. That is particularly true, I recall, when you are making a point in which you feel some question of character is at stake. It is a question of character that concerns me today. Therefore, permit me to address you within the idiom of your favorite sport.

Let me be frank to say at the outset that I never have been one of your more enthusiastic fans. Back in my rookie days I witnessed your famous play known as "the Checkers speech." That seemed to score with some people; it sent me to the exits. Perhaps then, I have done what a certain coach did to a certain quarterback. I pegged you then with the label "scrambler" and ever after refused to see you in any other light. Even so I hope I would be so unprejudiced as to express the same concern to another player whose style of play I found more to my liking.

The concern I raise is not one of partisan politics. I am not even interested in taking up directly the issue of your moral culpability in the Watergate affair and sundry other alleged instances of unsportsmanlike conduct. I must say that it does trouble me that you seem to take the moral aspects of these events so lightly. Whether and to what degree you yourself have been guilty of personal fouls remains open to question, and therefore, let me add, to continued investigation. That in your dual capacity of coach and quarterback you choose teammates who were guilty of such infractions is a matter of public record. We need to beware of imputing guilt by association to the quarterback. But there is still force to the old saying that people are known by the company they keep. A goodly share of the company you have kept at the expense of us ticket holders have been expelled from the game. You tell us repeatedly that what is said in the huddle is privileged information. Perhaps so. But under the circumstances, can you blame many of us for wondering what sort of signals originated there?

In any event, it hardly seems fitting for you to suggest as you did in your locker room speech between quarters last Wednesday, that the referees ought to forget about the fouls so that you personally can get on with the game.

There was a time when an essential element in sports was sportsmanship. We may make fun of the old code of gentlemanly fair play, and we may feel that very often the code was observed quite hypocritically. Still the code was there, and athletics were promoted in our schools because they supposedly cultivated qualities of character other than sheer ruthlessness. In this era of professional athletics, the slogan, "Winning is all that matters" seems to have taken over. No doubt that slogan always did describe the greater share of politics. But in the key position that you hold, a position which through the years has gathered up a burden of moral leadership, we expect a higher standard of play. You are quite right in believing that respect for your position on the field requires that we resist the temptation to remove the player every time there is a little booing in the stands. But respect for that position also requires that we allow no player to occupy it in dishonor.

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But the question that concerns me directly this morning is a question of character that you yourself have raised. Throughout your career you have stressed the qualities of grit and determination, of courage in the face of crisis and of the ability to come back after defeat. Let me give you your due: you yourself have given those qualities forceful expression. More than once you have been sacked for a disastrous loss only to come back with a winning play. Who would have thought that after losing the big one, and then taking a shellacking in the minor leagues, you would come back to win the Superbowl? Allow me to change the metaphor: like Rocky Graziano you have shown all us television boxers what it means to get up off the floor.

Now again you tell us that come what may, you will not run away from the game. Like Nehemiah who rebuilt the wall of Jerusalem, you stand on the ramparts and say to your detractors:

"I am doing a great work and I cannot come down."

It is an heroic posture. I admire your spirit. It is totally in character.

But I think I would be neglecting my duty as a servant of the word if I did not observe that this posture is not the only possible option for a man of high character.

Surely, you recognize that you are not alone up there. It is not as if you were running unattached in a race where it is every man for himself. We all have a stake in this game. Your personal reputation for staying power is of very little consequence to the other two hundred and eleven million of us who came not only to watch, but to play.

Recognizing that this is so, perhaps you will grant that a player in your position ought to bear the rest of us in mind. And so there may be another option for a man of high character, for a truly big man on and off the field. There comes a time in the career of many an athlete when he faces a decision requiring tremendous moral strength, a decision which requires that he put aside the question of how he will go down in the record books, which demands that he expose himself to the jeering of those who claim he couldn't stand the gaff, which means that he must run the risk of others attributing to him falsely mistakes that in fact he did not commit. The time does come when a man of truly champion calibre, a real team man, is ready to endure all those things for the sake of his school, his team and the honor of the game. There comes a time when a man like that in a situation like yours walks over to the sidelines before the hushed crowd and says, "I'm taking myself out of the game."