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Six months ago Richard and Pat Nixon lived in the political nerve center of the world — the White House. Today, they live in quiet and lonely retirement in San Clemente. An old friend of the Nixons recently asked if he could pay them a personal visit. Last January 24, the friend — who requested that his identity be withheld — this story — visited the former President and First Lady for two hours. Here is what he learned:

"It's very hard to change. Before there was so much going on . . . and now there's so little. So little."

Richard Nixon smiled faintly at his own words. He could not hide the agony and loneliness — it was etched too deeply in his face. He invited me into his office in what was once the Western White House, located on the sprawling grounds of a Coast Guard transmitting station.

The devastating change of events in 1974 — just two years after his landslide victory — had dramatically transformed him. He did not look like the same man we knew a year ago when as President he was the most powerful man on earth.

Nixon's face is thinner now, his hair grayer. His eyes aren't as bright and battling as they once were, but they're still piercing. His old self-assured walk has been replaced by a noticeable limp. His near-fatal phlebitis forces him to move slowly and cautiously, and he gingerly eased himself into a brown-gray velvet chair, resting his leg on a matching footstool.

"I bought this chair when I was Vice-President," he said. "It's been my favorite ever since. I wrote my book 'Six Crises' sitting in it."

"I took it to the Lincoln Sitting Room when I went to the White House, and I was sitting in it when Henry Kissinger told me Mao had invited me to China . . . and I wrote my resignation speech in this chair."

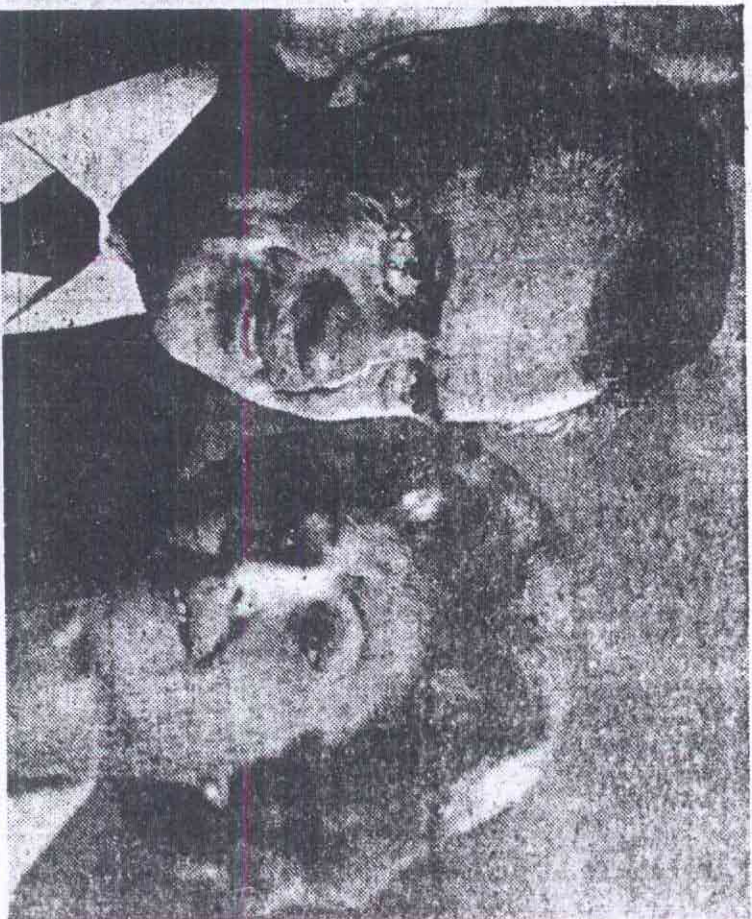
The resignation still eats away at his heart. Nixon said earnestly: "I did the best I could. Some of it was my fault."

"I was so busy that I just didn't take the time to watch everybody. I never thought much about being loved. I just did the best I could."

Nixon's sad eyes glanced at the Presidential flag standing to the left of his executive desk. An American flag stood on his right. "I have no feelings of bitterness. I'd rather look to the good things we accomplished during those years. This past Christmas we had no war, none of our boys were being killed in battle. Nobody was being drafted."

"We made friends among the nations of the world. East and West. We were strong and we were respected, and that makes the difference, you know."

Nixon gave another faint smile. "You know, it's times like these that you really find out who your



INSEPARABLE: Richard and Pat Nixon have grown closer together.

The Agony and Loneliness of Richard Nixon

friends are." It's no secret that in the wake of his resignation, many of his personal friends abandoned him.

The telephone rang and he answered it. Since his resignation, the entire switchboard at his compound has been ripped out, leaving him with three phone lines that he sometimes answers himself.

For the first time during our visit, Nixon's face was aglow. His daughter Julie was on the phone. After his chat with her, he said:

"That Julie. She's more outspoken than I've ever been in standing up for the good things we accomplished in the White House.

"She and Tricia call me often. They have been wonderful daughters and have provided strength to both Pat and me during these difficult times. We are awfully proud of them.

"Come on," he said, walking to the door, "let me show you around." We left his rosewood paneled office and climbed into a souped-up yellow golf cart with the words "President Nixon" painted on the front. As we drove through the San Clemente grounds — now just the empty shell of the bustling Western White House — an earlier statement by Ron Ziegler came to mind:

"Expenses have been cut to the bone. The office buildings here are prefabricated and most of them don't have phones any more. They've been stripped of furniture. But we're told that that's the way a former President is supposed to be treated in this country."

We headed toward the seven-room house Nixon fondly calls La Casa Pacifica — the House of Peace. On the way he admitted:

"I'm afraid that many Americans think I'm living here in splendor with hundreds of people working for me all being paid by the federal government. But in fact all that is mine is my house, and I have only a small

staff." The golf cart stopped in front of the house. Off to one side, Mrs. Nixon — wearing a bright yellow and pink pantsuit — stopped pottering in her garden and came toward us. She gave us a cheerful greeting.

"Isn't this a beautiful garden?" she asked. "I just love working with my flowers — that's how I spend most of my time."

After exchanging more pleasantries, she excused herself and headed for the garden where every day the former President and First Lady stroll hand in hand.

Nixon looked lovingly at Pat and then said: "These are very difficult, sad and lonely times for Pat and me.

"We spend a great deal of time together now — more so than ever before in our political lives. We've found that in times of crises, we grow even closer together.

"We talk about all these things. I get strength from her. She's at peace with herself. I don't know what history will say about me, but I know it will say that Pat was truly a wonderful woman. There couldn't have been a greater First Lady."

Nixon led the way into his house where mementos from his headline-making trips to China and Russia were proudly displayed.

He stopped and gazed out a window overlooking the Pacific. "I used to walk along the beach down there with my dog King Timahoe. He'd run into the water and then shake himself all over me. I used to get mad at him for getting me all wet. But now I wish we could do that again. The doctors say I can't go walking on the beach until March."

He lingered a moment longer — a wistful look in his eyes — and then with a slight limp strolled to the patio where a doctor was about to take the blood pressure of the 62-year-old former President.

Nixon took off his gray checkered sports coat and rolled up the sleeves of his blue shirt. After downing two pills with a glass of water, he was told by the doctor that the medication wasn't working as well as expected.

Nixon's conversation finally focused on politics. On President Ford: "I picked him because I felt he was the best man and because he had the support of Congress." On the Rockefeller Vice-Presidential hearings: "It was tough, what he had to go through after he was nominated."

On the nation and the world: "I hope and pray that things will improve. Everything is

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A MAN ALONE: Richard Nixon in thoughtful mood, pictured recently in grounds of his home in San Clemente, Calif.

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so unsettled now — I hope that the economy recovers, and that the world can hold on to the peace we tried to establish.”

And on the support of the American people: “Since my resignation, I’ve received over a million pieces of mail, overwhelmingly in my support.

“I’ve been unable to reply personally to each and every letter because my staff is so small and overworked.”

Nixon shook his head, pressing his lips together. “Do you

know it took me five and a half months to get my personal things returned from the White House, let alone my papers and other possessions?”

The government had refused to permit any of Nixon’s papers — including those which have nothing to do with Watergate — to be sent to San Clemente. He said they wouldn’t even permit him to retrieve a personal pair of eyeglasses he left behind.

Nixon estimates that the legal fees for non-Watergate related matters that he has been slapped with because of his resignation will run to almost half a million dollars.

I had spent nearly two hours with Nixon and it was time to leave.

But first he rummaged around in his desk and held out a presidential tiebar.

“Perhaps you’d like this,” he said. “It’s the only one I have left from my White House days.”

His handshake was firm as he said goodbye. Then he filled his pipe and turned to gaze out over the Pacific.