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Pat Nixon: A Full Partner In the American Dream

By Donnie Radcliffe

OF ALL RICHARD Nixon's advisers, only one at the end had been there at the beginning, and not until she conceded it was all over would he finally announce that it was.

For Patricia Ryan Nixon, it was an agonizing concession contrary to everything she once steadfastly believed to be true. Until the last desperate month of her husband's embattled presidency, she had been his eyes and ears on the outside world, however insulated and controlled that world was.

"No," Pat Nixon had said in May, 1974, when asked if she would "let" her husband resign. "Why should he? There's no reason to."

Some saw her, in that twilight of Richard Nixon's political career, determined to ward off his destruction knowing it meant her own as well as his—and, in legacy, that of their daughters, Julie Nixon Eisenhower and Tricia Nixon Cox. Others characterized her as too committed to the "total investment" she had made in him over the years, commitments of grief and pain as well as happiness, ever to admit that he was not what he seemed to be to her, or their daughters.

She was sustained, she had said throughout that final spring as First Lady, by "the truth . . . When you know the truth you have nothing to fear." And for her, as for her daughters, truth was "great faith" in Nixon, "an honorable, dedicated person."

Publicly, she held to the "positive outlook" through her readings of a word, a look, a handshake—messages of reassurance she could later relay to her husband. In the White House, a house that she liked to remind her visitors belonged to "all the people," she presided over teas and luncheons and receptions, seeing old and new friends. And in the crush she listened for their versions of "the truth" as evidence of unflagging support.

"You'd think that every day reading the paper, seeing some negative things and some positive things, but most of the time negative, it would get you down," Julie Eisenhower said in describing her mother's emotional state. "But she seems to be able to weather anything and I really admire her for it."

PAT NIXON'S strength, said this loyal daughter, issued from a combination of love for and belief in Richard Nixon and the "very philosophical" ability to take things with "a grain of salt."

Others defined Pat Nixon's strength in terms of a strong will, a legendary self-discipline, a disinclination to re-



live the past and a lifelong determination to rise above adversities.

If Mrs. Nixon despaired in those terminal days of an era, she effectively concealed it. There were late night walks to relieve the tensions and occasional glimpses offered by friends of a growing bitterness that the President's enemies were after his "last pound of flesh." But in public appearances and to her own White House staff, she appeared controlled and optimistic.

As the lifelong bride of crisis, she believed that "you live one day at a time . . . you can't live by criticism."

Only her face betrayed her rising doubts in deepening lines around the mouth and an unnatural puffing about the eyes. After 62 years what seemed to have been spared so long was cruelly catching up at last.

As Richard Nixon's dreams of an honored place in history crumbled, so did Pat Nixon's of final freedom from political pressures. She viewed his reelection in 1972 as the end forever of The Campaign, which for her meant White House years of doing what she pleased. Instead, the pressures became greater than ever. In the ensuing 20 months she returned to the hustings as if to reassure a troubled constituency that in a man's family is reflected the decency of the man. Her instant smile was undisturbed by chants and placards calling for Richard Nixon's impeachment. It was her defense against what she did not want to see or hear. She sought to blot out Watergate by refusing to discuss it.

"No," she interrupted a reporter traveling with her from South America in March, 1974, "I really don't wish to speak of it. It's just a personal thing and why bring that into the trip?"

EYES STEELY and voice stern, she rebuked her press corps further: "You all who follow me day after day know how positive I feel about everything and I really have faith in the judgment of the American people and the press people. I'm not going to rehash an innuendo and source story in repetition . . ."

Watergate was so unimportant, she said on that trip, that Latin American newspapers did not even bother to report it. "It's only covered in (U.S.) metropolitan papers," she informed reporters accompanying her on the 5,000-mile flight home which ended that night at Nashville's Grand Ole Opry, a carefully advanced welcoming ceremony and 62nd birthday party presided over by Richard Nixon.

Whatever her rationale in reaching "the truth" about her husband's Watergate role, Pat Nixon arrived at it after 33 years in Richard Nixon's philosophical and political shadow.

In 1971 when protesters and pickets glared at the White House from Lafayette Park, Mrs. Nixon told of working on "the other side of the house. I can see the Washington Monument and Jefferson Memorial outside my windows. The view inspires me." At a 1972 press conference, she hardly hesitated before answering that in all her years of public life, "I don't believe I have had any disappointing moments."

Despite published reports to the contrary, or Richard Nixon's recollection of it, she denied they had ever discussed quitting politics after his unsuccessful 1962 race for governor of Cali-

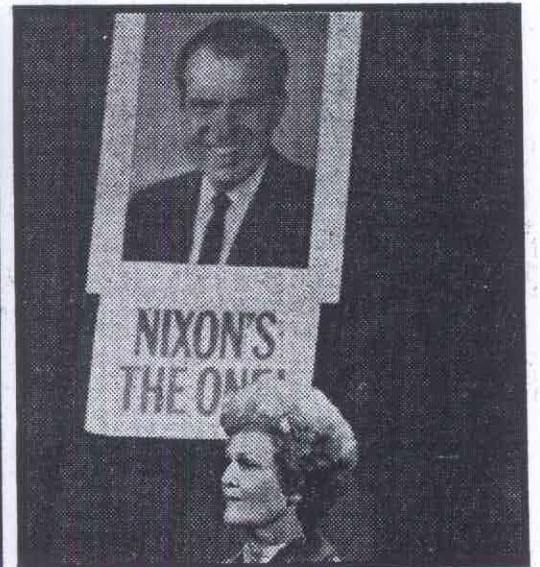
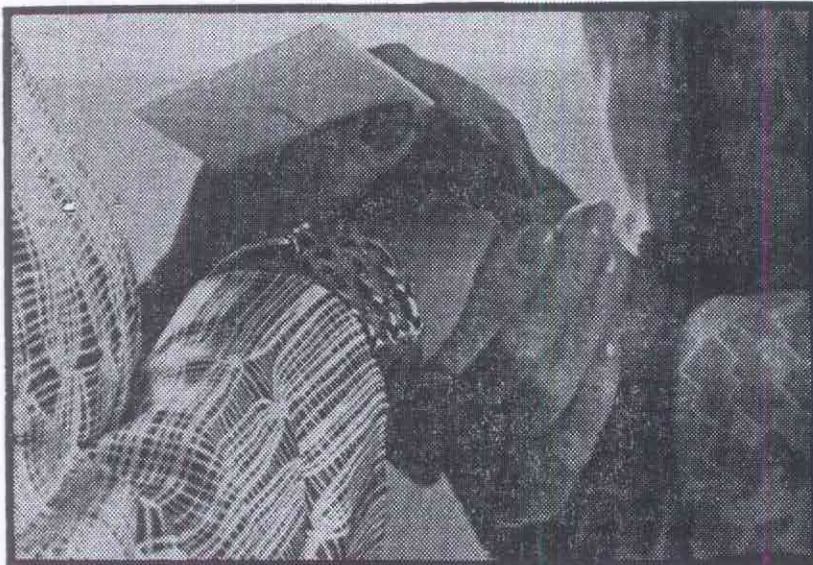
fornia. "We just got interested in other things—law, New York, a trip to Europe with the girls. It wasn't a time for depression."

Even her memories of angry anti-American mobs threatening her and Richard Nixon's lives in Caracas, Venezuela, in 1958, were charitable ones. "There were only a few radicals, terrorists really," she recalled 16 years later of that "fourth crisis." "The majority of the people were gracious and nice and for that reason I say that I remember the trip with pleasure rather than fear."

WHETHER UNABLE to, or simply unwilling, she avoided looking back, a characteristic that some saw as a defense mechanism in insulating herself against the harsh realities of life. And in at least one instance, it resulted in an abortive effort by an officially designated biographer to write Pat Nixon's life.

Legendary by the time she reached the White House in 1969 as the once-reluctant political helpmate, she had learned that "you can do anything you put your mind to. You can adjust to anything if you want to." If she had long before accommodated herself to Richard Nixon's career, it was because that was what he wanted "and there was a part for me to play."

Richard Nixon knew that, but so did she. Her stage became the campaign arena where she soared to stardom as his most attractive political device. "She understood the name of the game," said a former White House staffer, "but she was never used



against her will. She was politically astute in the broadest sense of how it related to power and people and she had good, strong gut reactions about what she thought was right."

Never modest about her "way" with people—"I hate to brag," she once replied when asked who was the family's best campaigner—Mrs. Nixon's secret of success was, "I always look the person in the eye. I feel when you meet the eye a friendship is started."

For a clue to the real Pat Nixon, historians will have to look earlier to when she was Thelma Catherine Ryan, a resolute little girl of solid if humble origins "I may have been born in a tent," she said years later of her birth on March 16, 1912, at Ely, Nev.

The American Dream was free for the dreaming and she dreamed it often while growing up as a truck farmer's daughter in that California community then called Artesia. Motherless at 13, fatherless at 17, hers was the story of youth overcoming limited means and meager opportunities by hard work.

Her years as a poor farm girl, unselfish daughter nursing a dying father, \$7-a-day movie extra earning her way through college and ultimately a \$190-a-month "pep club" school teacher, as she liked to joke, led to struggling young lawyer Dick Nixon and his political calling. "I could see it was the life Dick wanted," she said in those interminable interviews which began in 1946 when, virtually rising from her first bed of childbirth, she became his "white glove" fundraiser, stand-in and campaign office manager.

IN AN ERA when the political wife was seen but never heard, she was the epitome of good scout and devoted wife, a worthy understudy to Richard Nixon's mother, canonized forever in his self-acclaimed Quaker mind.

Self-made man married to self-made woman, the Nixons combined American Dreams, rising from a Whittier garage apartment all the way to the White House and private seaside estates at San Clemente and Key Biscayne.

Though uncaring, she said, of "creature comforts," Pat Nixon could at last set about refining her dream house. In 1969, showing off results of her efforts at San Clemente, she told reporters of "trying to be economical" and working on a "sort of" budget. The Secret Service would later insist that the landscaping and remodeling had been for security reasons, but that evening in 1969 Mrs. Nixon was proudly taking credit. "If you'd seen this house before, you'd know you had to have imagination to change it," she said.

Tough behind the scenes—"She's one person Nixon would never tackle," said a former aide—she was confident about her role. She never needed briefings from Nixon's political advisers, she once told reporters. "Oh, no, indeed. I have my own ideas. I've been

in this field so long I don't think anyone could brief me."

On center stage, her control was flawless, papier-mache and plastic to her detractors, dignified, gracious and inspiring to her supporters.

Once, in California's Humboldt County, where the Nixons and the Lyndon B. Johnsons flew to dedicate the Lady Bird Johnson (redwood) Grove, Mrs. Nixon winced when her husband forgot to introduce her to the crowd. But her enigmatic smile stayed firmly in place as Nixon told how he and Johnson had "much in common . . . Both of us were born in small towns, both of us served in the House, both in the Senate, both were Vice President, both were elected President. And both of us were very fortunate in the fact that we married above ourselves."

Richard Nixon knew that. In his Checkers speech of 1952, he told a nationwide television audience that "Pat is not a quitter. After all, her name was Patricia Ryan and she was born on Saint Patrick's Day and you know the Irish never quit."

He would later reveal of that "second crisis" and the pressures on him to resign, "Pat reacted with fire in her eyes. You can't think of resigning. If you do, Eisenhower will lose. He can put you off the ticket if he wants to but if you, in the face of attack, do not fight back but simply crawl away, you will destroy yourself. Your life will be marred forever and the same will be true of your family and particularly your daughters!"

In their pre-Watergate days, Pat Nixon viewed her husband's critics as "part of the job. I once read that Lincoln had worse critics. He was big enough not to let it bother him. That's the way my husband is."

By the end, the fabric of Pat Nixon's "good Republican cloth coat" life had begun to look threadbare and it was difficult to remember that on Jan. 20, 1969, fulfillment of Pat and Richard Nixon's American Dream had seemed at hand.

On that crisply cold morning, a bipartisan congressional group invited to the White House for coffee broke up to leave for the Capitol. Striding out of the Red Room, Lyndon Johnson quickened his pace to the limousine outside. Behind, hurrying to catch up, was Richard Nixon. Looking first at his own feet then at Johnson's, Nixon shuffled into step and moved to Johnson's left.

"I've got my protocol right this time," Nixon said, as much to himself as to Johnson. "The President is on the right." Behind them, in proper order, were Lady Bird Johnson and Pat Nixon.

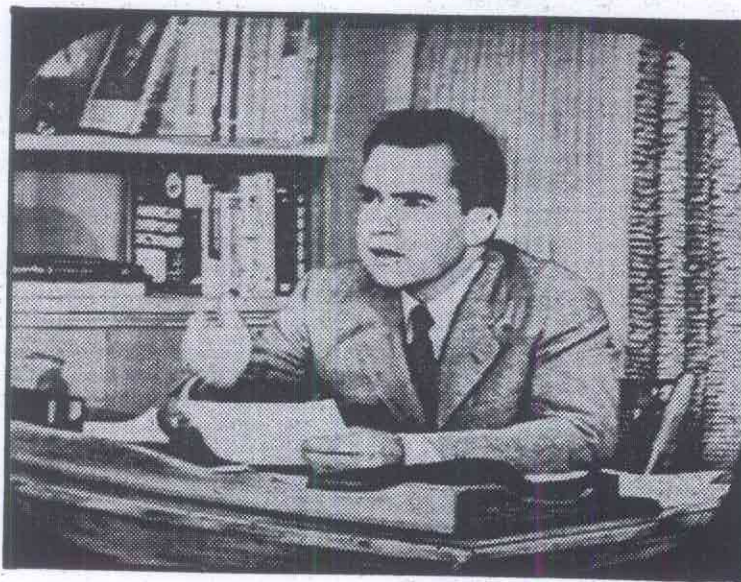
That day, at least, Patricia Ryan Nixon seemed to know exactly where she was going.

Radcliffe, an editor in The Washington Post's "Style" section, has covered Patricia Nixon for many years.

The Seven Crises Of Richard M. Nixon

THE HISS CASE

... On that evening of August 5, as I reviewed Hiss' testimony, I realized that this case presented a crisis infinitely greater and more complex than anything I had faced running for Congress in 1946 — Aug. 5, 1948



THE FUND

As I waited for them, I knew that if the reports with regard to the Herald Tribune were accurate, I had been hit by a real blockbuster. I had firmly believed up to this time that since the attack was strictly partisan and would not stand up on its merits, our strategy of continuing to play it down would not pay off and it would be forgotten within a few days. I still believe this would have been the case had the attack continued to come from only Democrats and from newspapers which were opposed to Eisenhower as well as to me. But when Republicans as well as Democrats began to demand my scalp, the roof caved in. — September, 1952

THE HEART ATTACK

"Dick," said a familiar voice, "this is Jim Haggerty—the President has had a coronary."

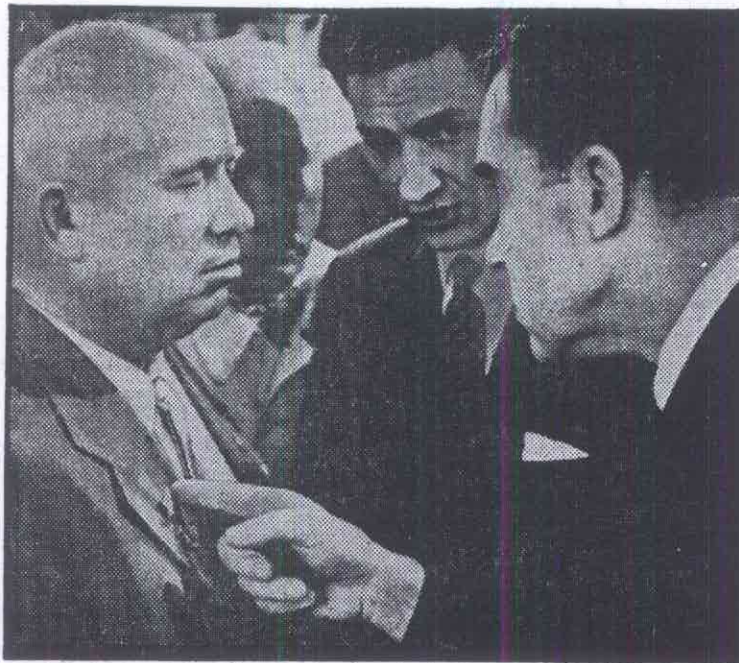
... This was far different from any other crisis had faced in my life and had to be handled differently. I had always believed in meeting a crisis headon. The difficult period is reaching a decision, but once that has been done, the carrying-out of the decision is easier than the making of it. In meeting any crisis in life, one must either fight or run away. But one must do something. Not knowing how to act or not being able to act is what tears your insides out."

— Sept. 24, 1955

CARACAS

It was past 2 a.m. when I finally turned out the light and tried to get some sleep. I had only eight hours in which to decide whether or not to keep the appointment at San Marcos. Whether, in effect, to fight or run away from this crisis which had implications far beyond my personal safety. I slept very little that night. I could feel the tension building up. Outside the hotel, I could hear the chants of mob swirling around the hotel, "Fuera Nixon, Fuera Nixon, Fuera Nixon."

As I tossed in bed, I knew from previous experience that this necessary period of indecision was far more wearing than tomorrow's activities would be, no matter which way I decided. This was part of the crisis syndrome as I knew it. — May, 1958



DEBATING KHRUSHCHEV

Now we were going at it toe-to-toe. To some, it may have looked as though we had both lost our tempers. But exactly the opposite was true. I had full and complete control of my temper and was aware of it. I knew the value of keeping cool in a crisis, and what I said and how I said it was done with as much calm and deliberation as I could muster in a running, impromptu debate with an expert. — July, 1959

1960 CAMPAIGN

... It was now almost midnight. In fifteen minutes I would have to go downstairs alone to the Ambassador ballroom and speak ... I thought back over other crisis which had confronted me as I prepared for speeches or key press conferences: the fund speech in 1952; my White House press conference after the President's stroke in 1957; trying to hold my temper as I met the press in Lima and Caracas after the riots there in 1958; those tense moments when Khrushchev had verbally assaulted me at the American Exhibition in Moscow and I had a split-second to decide whether to remain silent, to retreat, or to fight back.

But this was the greatest test of all. How could I be gracious, and yet not concede outright?—Nov. 8, 1960

WATERGATE

Nixon: How much money do you need?

Dean: I would say these people are going to cost a million dollars over the next two years.

Nixon: We could get that. On the money, if you need the money you could get that. You could get a million dollars. You could get it in cash. I know where it could be gotten. It is not easy, but it could be done. But the question is who the hell would handle it? Any ideas on that? — March 21, 1973