

Joseph Kraft

Nixon's Memoirs

Part 11-18-76

President Ford's phone call to former President Nixon in California reminds me of something I nearly forgot. That is the sample chapter of Mr. Nixon's memoir of his presidency which came my way not long ago.

By itself the document is a piece of sentimental trash. But a word seems in order partly because there are one or two contentious items in the text, and partly because so much false information has been spread about the first draft of the sample chapter.

Probably the most important point is that in the first draft, at least, Nixon does not deny his guilt. He acknowledges that he approved the basic Watergate cover-up plan, including the effort to use the CIA to ward off the FBI investigation. He further admits that the original decision to cover up led him into a long series of lies in which he used the power of the presidency, including responsibility for national security, to protect himself and his friends.

To be sure, the guilt is minimized. As Nixon has it, the original decision was a casual one, made under prodding from his chief of staff, H. R. Haldeman, for the purpose of preventing the blowing

up of a big scandal that might compromise John Mitchell and others. Nixon gives the impression of a man who incidentally, almost without realizing what he was doing, stepped onto the conveyor belt that took him over the cliff.

A second point of interest involves the pardon, or more specifically the meeting that took place between the White House chief of staff, Gen. Alexander Haig, and Watergate Special Prosecutor Leon Jaworski on the day of the resignation. That meeting has always been an object of suspicion, and the final report of the Watergate Special Prosecutor deepened doubts instead of clearing them away.

Nixon deepens the doubts further. In the sample chapter he claims that Gen. Haig returned from the meeting to inform him that he had nothing to fear from the special prosecutor. That could be an innocuous reassurance—Haig's correct conclusion after his conversation that Mr. Jaworski was not interested in prosecuting a former President and had doubts about whether a fair trial could be obtained.

But another interpretation is open. It is that Haig improperly raised the issue of letting Nixon off, and that Jaworski

gave him assurances. That point is central to the question of whether or not there was a deal allowing Nixon to get off before he resigned. Since Nixon, in his account, tends to support the view that something like a deal had at least been offered, Haig ought to break his long silence and elucidate the matter.

The more so as Nixon treats Haig—like almost everybody else involved—in cavalier fashion. The former President speaks of a "mutiny" by Haig at one point when the general insisted on releasing the tape of the conversation that finally proved beyond a shadow of a doubt Nixon's guilt. Nixon deals in the same way with virtually everybody else who at any time gave him less than total loyalty. Thus such 98-per-cent loyalists as Sens. Hugh Scott and Barry Goldwater, the then-chairman of the Republican National Committee and present CIA Director George Bush, former Attorney General William Saxbe and numerous other persons in the White House and the Congress are at one point or another fed into the flames.

The only 100-per-cent loyalists—apart from Ron Ziegler, Rose Mary Woods and Steve Bull of the White House staff

—are the Nixon family, especially daughter Tricia, whose diary is extensively cited, and her husband Edward Cox. Mrs. Nixon is, of course, also in the magic circle. But she is cited almost not at all. Indeed, her silence is deafening.

The place of honor given to the tiny handful of persons who urged him to tough it out all the way destroys Nixon's central claim about the final days. That is that he had made up his mind to resign, but only wanted to do it in a way that would not weaken the powers of the presidency. On the contrary, the internal evidence is that, until the very last moment, he clutched at every possible straw that would keep him in the White House.

Perhaps worst of all in the draft chapter is the larger case Nixon makes for himself. He virtually eschews the plea that his wrongs were balanced by important achievements, particularly in foreign policy. Instead he plays for tears, going on ad nauseam about the beauties of the White House, the closeness of his family, the loveliness of the yacht Sequoia. He argues his last big political case as he argued his first one—on the level of the family dog Checkers.