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Sunday with Richard Nixon

In an exclusive interview, his first verbatim remarks since leaving office, the former president talks candidly about Gerald Ford, the shortage of national leadership, Henry Kissinger, the CIA—and his own state of mind. By William M. Fine

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SAN CLEMENTE, CALIF.

The approach to what used to be the Western White House is almost like an approach to any new, western-style leisure village. There is a guard booth—two policemen—in uniforms of state or county issue. There are two five-foot wooden gates that open electrically on signal. The area in front of Richard M. Nixon's small, five-acre compound is still partially owned by the U.S. Government, having been a Coast Guard area; part of the land behind the compound is owned by Robert Abplanalp, and another section was once owned by Bebe Rebozo. No explanation is given as to why Rebozo no longer has title to the other half of backup property to the compound. The grass leading up to the house is long and blowing gently in a typical 70° California day.

Off on the left is the almost-newly-built Western White House, now empty: two low, flat buildings, with a small courtyard and a walkway in between. The rear building was for press and communications people. The other structure fronts on the ocean. There are half a dozen offices, empty and un-lived in, all except one—the office the ex-president still uses from time to time. The walls are lined with great, poster-like pictures of Nixon with Chou En-lai, with Mao Tse-tung, with Leonid Brezhnev, with Willy Brandt and with other world leaders.

There are several photographs of the former president and his family at the White House.

It is obvious that Nixon works, or reads, in different locations in this office. There is a pair of eyeglasses on the large desk, bare except for a recent letter from Herman Kahn of the Hudson Institute; a pen set with the Presidential Seal, and a few mementos of office. There are two other pairs of eyeglasses at other points in the room—one near a large easy chair, another near a straight-backed chair alongside a reading lamp. There are two books at this station, both on American history.

Ron Ziegler, Mr. Nixon's former press secretary, who guided me into the compound, says the ex-president has been reading a lot of history lately—especially H. G. Wells, whom he quotes during the infrequent visits with friends.

Ziegler and I walk into the house. It is a comfortable, upper-middle-class house, with a million dollar view of the Pacific from any window on the front side of the house. There is a smallish, square table off in a corner of the living room, in front of an arched window. This is where Mr. and Mrs. Nixon dine. Under the window is a broad expanse of lush green planting, then a broad patch of beach, and then the quiet Pacific stretching endlessly to the horizon.



Photograph by Ollie Atkins from Time Magazine. Copyright © TIME, Inc.

We walk back to the patio, and while Ziegler checks the president's den office, I poke around outside. I walk past the front of the house toward the sound of raking leaves. As I approach the garden area to the left of the house, there is Mrs. Nixon—more white-haired than honey-blond—with a net wrapped around her hair. She is raking the garden. I say "hello," and she says "hello." Then, "Oh, I look a sight. Didn't know I'd be meeting a guest today . . . these weeds are a handful. This soil and temperature make the weeds as lush as the flowers."

I bring her a greeting from a friend in Los Angeles, and she says "she's such a lovely girl." She seems very detached, but very soft and strong at the same time. We talk some more small talk then she excuses herself and goes on raking leaves and weeds.

The first twinge of sadness touches you after talking with Pat Nixon. She seems like a wounded bird.

Ziegler says Mr. Nixon is off the phone. He's been talking to Washington. "Go on in, he's expecting you," Ziegler says.

The ex-president's office, up 13 or 14 steps from the courtyard, is like a round turret room. There are just family pictures around this room—not the international who's who of his working office in the other building. (continued)

Sunday with Richard Nixon

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He is wearing a blue-and-white checked cashmere sport jacket, a blue shirt and a blue tie. His slacks are light blue; his loafers simulated alligator. His handshake is firm—his head seems very dominant in the smallish room, particularly with his thinnish frame. He is healthy looking, especially his face, but when he takes a seat in his easy chair, he quickly puts his leg up on an ottoman. He has on a small Ace bandage under his Supp-hose.

"Well, Bill, how is the world of textiles? How is the world in general, and what do they think of me lately?"

He has been partially briefed on my background, and he seems genuinely interested in banter for a few moments. But when I ask if I can ask some questions, he seems to perk up even more.

On President Ford: He's okay. Right now, he is too accessible. A congress or a parliament can paralyze leadership. You can't get caught up in absurdities.

On the CIA: They are going to be polarized for awhile, I'm afraid. I can't see how they can be helpful to our security if stripped of the cloak of secrecy. Sometimes, overt acts by the

CIA can save thousands of lives and ease pressure points in world diplomacy. Extreme measures can become necessary if one is putting down evil consequences. The probe will show we accomplished some courageous acts. It will also show we had nothing to do with Chile or Allende. That was the Chileans.

On the mood of the country: We are so cynical, so disbelieving—it may take the shock of an invasion—in Korea or in Thailand. If American lives are threatened, we may regain our sense of belief in our country and our need for strength. We are a compromised country at the moment. The Communist countries don't need troops or military acts right now. They can just keep adding pressure points and take strategic advantage in the Far East and Middle East. Japan will be questioning its position regularly. We gave the Philippines their independence too soon, I fear.

We have very little leadership in our country today. Can you name any strong religious leaders? The media has abdicated its fact-gathering to non-believing young people, who seem to want to break down our values. I used to be able to make sense with the Paleys, the Sarnoffs and the Goldensons, and with that new fellow at CBS, even with the key commentators; but a lot of their research comes from a very cynical element.

Anyhow, if the church and the media and business and educators (*continued*)

Sunday with Richard Nixon

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all allow the undermining of our strength and values, we will keep drifting that way—and our allies in the Far East won't put any belief in our commitments. I worry most about Japan.

On the economy: It's wrong of us to take a stand on \$60-billion over budget. We are already committed to \$15 or \$20 billion in that new budget. We have to go to \$70 billion or more. Things may be heating up too quickly. I was for a slower recovery. I know [Federal Reserve Board Chairman Arthur] Burns was, too. Inflation isn't beaten or controlled, which will probably mean another downturn in a shorter period of time. The stock market will be telling us that in eight or ten months, I think.

On Kissinger: I told Mr. Nixon that I got the feeling that he was at least half of Henry Kissinger. "I would have to say that you provided a better environment of his very special diplomatic talents," I said. The ex-president grinned a genuine grin (others seemed forced). "How many people do you think understand that?" he replied. "It's true, of course."

On himself: Yes, I know all the things

that were and still are being said about me. Do you think the mood of the people is changing?

I told him yes, ever so slightly.

On office we were sitting in—and what took place there: Brezhnev sat where you are sitting. He wasn't well, even when he was here. He did not want to be put up in more spacious quarters nearby. Wanted to stay here at the house. We had an early dinner, and at 8:30 Brezhnev said he wanted to go to bed—that he was very tired. We went to bed two or three hours later, and I remember Henry rapping on my door saying [Soviet Ambassador to the U.S. Anatoli] Dobrynin was up, so was Brezhnev, and that they wanted to talk. Brezhnev sat on that couch with Dobrynin. Victor, the translator, sat over there, Mr. Nixon said, motioning with a pipe he had filled but never lit. They got pretty rough that night, but we cooled 'em, I thought. Anyhow, just thought you'd like to know this room has had some history. They are a tough bunch, and they *give* very begrudgingly.

I asked him what he would do if he were in the White House now, considering the fall of South Vietnam and the mood of the U.S.—a country with diminishing patriotism and increasing cynicism? He lit his pipe and said: That's a question I have puzzled over more than once. I think I would ask five or six of

the best brains around me to go off on a retreat for several weeks and ponder some things—how we could make our people feel more pride, not be so concerned with Arab wealth. What's wrong with being the *second* wealthiest country for awhile? We, as a country, have to provide strength and leadership. England is at a standstill. France seems in disarray. They really are Latins in temperament, you know, and they seem to be proving it now. Italy has a crisis government. Germany can't rally a world cause. South Africa? Where *do* we expect leadership to emerge?

I'd work on a major television presentation to our people on the eve of our 200th birthday. Remind them that in 1776 we only had *spiritual* wealth, and look where it took us. We must rekindle that spiritual growth to knit our people together. It's a tough job.

"I guess that's part of an answer," he said. "I'd have to give it a lot more thought to make better sense."

I looked at him for what seemed like a 90-second minute.

His hair is whiter than when he left office in August of 1974. His voice is firm, and at times he seems to punctuate his words—with that forced smile, it seems almost as if some television adviser had suggested it. He is surrounded by a yellow pad and several pens. On

(continued on page 116)

the table is a cassette dictating machine. In answer to "How is the book coming?" he says, "You can see I'm hard at it. "It's coming kind of slowly."

An hour and a half had passed quickly. It seemed time to break it up. There wasn't much more to say, without digging at things that are still very painful.

As I started to leave, I said, "Somehow, I imagined our only living ex-president, in spite of the past, would be afforded just a little more grace to honor the office of the presidency, even if the man must remain unforgiven."

"Well, it might come to that," Richard Nixon said. "As you can see, we are *not* in a lap of luxury here, but we get by."

He stands up and says, almost if to himself rather than to me, "Never give up. Never give up. Remember that."

Never give up.

The firm handshake again—this time he hangs on a moment. The power is momentarily there, swirling around the small room like static in the air.

Outside—getting back into the golf cart emblazoned "President Nixon" and heading up the driveway—you start to recall those days in August 1974. **End**