

# The Unmaking Of a President

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*THE FINAL DAYS.* By Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein. Simon & Schuster. 476 pp. \$10.95

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By JOHN K. GALBRAITH

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THESE DILIGENT AND RESOURCEFUL reporters, as everyone knows, were largely responsible for uncovering the Watergate coverup. There were, of course, others who deserve thanks. For resisting the criminal and similar tendencies of the Nixon Administration, more credit than is commonly given should go to the good, gray, honest federal bureaucracy—IRS, FBI, Justice Department—the people everyone is attacking these days, though they probably comprise the best civil service there is. And it was the staff of the Ervin committee that discovered the existence of the terrible tapes without which Mr. Nixon might still be with us.

But no one can diminish the Woodward-Bernstein achievement. They then went on to write a very good book on their effort (*All the President's Men*) which has become a motion picture. Now they have reported in massive and greatly publicized detail on the last days of Nixon and his regime. In doing so, they affirm a high principle of our time. It is, paraphrasing the late Ogden Nash, that

If there is any principle to American journalism unknown,  
It is, leave well enough alone.

There are things of interest in this book, all on the predictable side. When a man is thoroughly boxed in—can move neither left nor right, forward nor backward and stands on a firm floor—his only hope is levitation. For this the recognized instruments are alcohol and prayer, tools that must, over the years, have put God in touch with some very desperate and very drunken men. (In 1945, George Ball and I interrogated Albert Speer over a period of many days. At one juncture he observed, with much emphasis, that historians of the Third Reich would say that it drowned in a sea of alcohol. The high Nazis may have been the limiting case of men who knew their position was too hopeless for prayer.) Not surprisingly, toward the end the

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Nixons resorted heavily to God and the sauce. But it is not exactly news: stories to this effect have been circulating even to Cambridge, and all who saw Nixon announce his resignation and saw him depart, could also see that he was at the end of his emotional tether, although Eric Sevareid thought his last speech was becoming and graceful and spoke well of it.

The authors tell also that Henry Kissinger had little regard for Nixon, which does not make him unique, and had all of his telephone communications taken down. This, 35 years ago, when I was running Price Control, was routine. It ensured against later charges that one had authorized concessions or yielded to improper influence. The archives must have several acres of such conversations unless they have been pitched out.

Finally, the authors show conclusively that Mr. Nixon's lawyers, Mr. Buzhardt and Mr. St. Clair in particular, were men of marked incompetence. But this too is somewhat predictable. It must be hard to look good in a case like this: Better Patty Hearst.

I might note that the President's lawyers, despite their flawed performance, seem, nonetheless, to have been willing to talk about their client, their achievements and the case in general. Mr. St. Clair's reflections on the upholstery of White House cars and the rewards of his new assignment while driving from San Clemente to the Los Angeles airport after his selection could have come only from him or second-hand from the Army chauffeur. They are a bit on the introspective side to be relayed by the average sergeant.

Unless, of course, they were invented. Along with the absence of anything that is both important and novel (the volume of truly insignificant detail is enormous), this invention is troubling. When a journalist uses direct quotes, one expects them to be what the man said. Anyhow I do. This book is replete with quotations, sometimes with supporting thoughts, that could only have been constructed long after they were uttered.

The authors are both smart and careful: I'm sure they come close. But that is not good enough. The rule is that one gets the quotation right or one does not print it, anyway as nonfiction. As someone once pointed out, it would give a very different tone to the proceedings had Stanton said, when speaking for Pershing, "Lafayette, we are here, I think." Or equally if Caesar had said, "I came, I saw and now there is light at the end of the tunnel." Nixon did, in fact, say, "Well, I am not a crook." But had he been speaking in private, the authors' rendering could have been: "Well, by the standards of this Administration, I am not a crook." No one could have objected to that.

The *Final Days* will have a big sale, and this I applaud. In these days of systematic self-flagellation, we can rightly boast that we are the first country ever to make the reward for uncovering wrongdoing greater than the reward for committing it. But we must not imagine that the books on Watergate—this or the ones yet to come—have any historical importance. Millions of us disliked Richard Nixon, an attitude that he cultivated with his only approach to genius. So for

many there is enjoyment in reading about his downfall in the vast and intricate detail of which Messrs. Woodward and Bernstein are the masters. I for one had long ago given up hope that Nixon would be punished in this world. Watergate restored my faith in the essential fairness of things. He is indeed the only man in the Republic whose misfortunes people can read about with no sense of guilt. But the material that plays to this pleasure is not for that reason important.

This book will also be enjoyed, a more serious matter, because politics in the United States has become a major spectator sport. It is concerned primarily with performance in the political game, only secondarily with issues. We react not to the solutions being offered to our problems but to the quality of the show.

Watergate was a truly great show. The casting—John Mitchell as the heavy, John Dean as the Sunday-school type gone wrong but retrieved, Jeb Magruder as the all-American boy, Chuck Colson as the improbable baby in Christ—was the best since "Oklahoma." Woodward and Bernstein are reminding us of this show. There is a rule that everyone watching television must have firmly in mind. If John Chancellor or any lesser commentator says of a political event being filmed that "history is being made," you can be sure that nothing much is happening. It is only that John is secretly concerned because he is enjoying it so much and knows that the audience is enjoying it too. So he feels the need to tell himself and the audience that the spectacle has redeeming social content.

The Watergate experience, like Vietnam before, illuminates another serious, possibly even fatal, flaw in our public arrangements. Every four or eight years we confer vast power in the White House on presidential men with no prior experience of government. This and not inherent criminal tendency was the real defect of Haldeman, Ehrlichman and their younger acolytes. With exceptions, we expect Cabinet officers, like presidents, to have previous experience in public office. And as heads of departments, Cabinet members are subject to the guidance and restraining hand of their bureaucracy. The people around the President are now more powerful than the Cabinet and without this experience or guidance. Watergate was the work of political amateurs who thought that their deception and deceit would be undiscovered and, if discovered, accepted. Much the same could be said about Vietnam. Then too power was exercised by men without experience in its limits, deceit practiced by men who did not know the certainty of its exposure. These are the kind of lessons—the White House as an exercise in blundering amateurism—which we should be drawing from Watergate and discussing in the books.

Messrs. Woodward and Bernstein do not address such questions and perhaps, as reporters, it was not their business. But it was their business to go on from Watergate to the other rich undiscovered pools of wickedness in Washington. It is sad that, with such talent, they felt compelled to chew over once more the already well-documented misfeasance, malfeasance, general sleaziness and low-grade rascality of Richard Nixon.

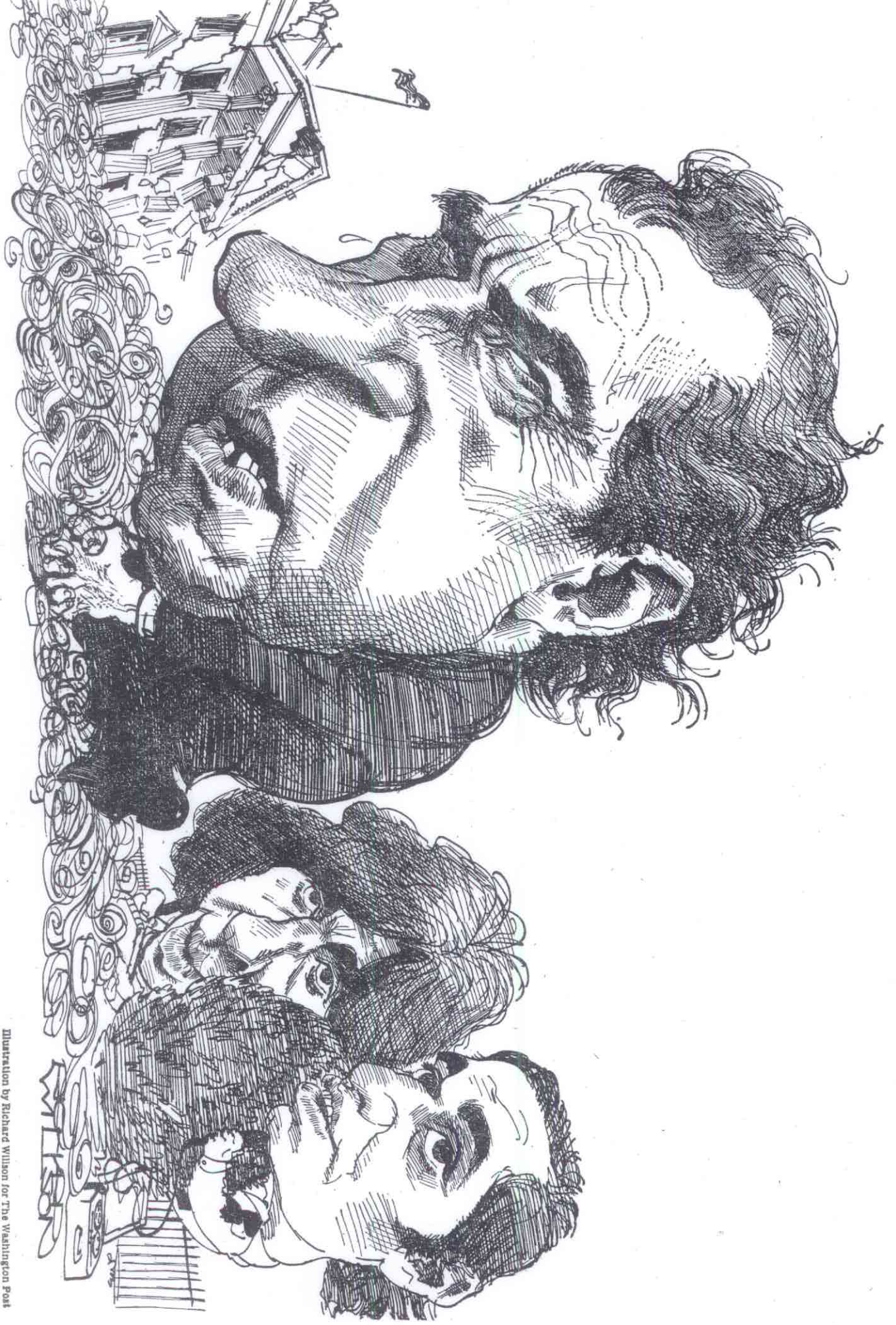


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