

Reporting the Unmaking of a

Reviewed by

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"The Last Nixon Watch," the general title John Osborne has given to his superb New Republic chronicles of the law and order administration, turned out to be a death watch. And although less than a year has passed since he wrote the last of these pieces the emotional distance gives them an almost antiquarian flavor — as if it were all ancient history.

In another way, recalling the hectic climate in which this book was written, we may think of it as the log of a ship whose decks could be felt alight, while the gurgle of leaks far below decks became louder and louder. Yet no one could be sure the ship would go down. Also, the principal figure on the stricken ship seems to have put Osborne in mind of Captain Queeg, of the troubled *Caine* — though he doesn't say so directly. There is an insistent note, throughout, of amateur psychologizing — a rumor here, a speculation there that Nixon is on the edge of some collapse. Osborne tells us in his introductory "overview" that it was an old reportorial suspicion, among those who observed him closely, "that he might go bats in front of them at any time."

Well, Richard M. Nixon never exactly went bats, but if he had, the readers of the New Republic would have been forewarned. On Dec. 31, we find Osborne reporting that he had conversed with a White House assistant who hinted, without actually saying, that "the President was sick of mind." By March, he "appears ... to be

a tortured man, intermittently close to collapse." At a hospital dedication in Miami, "his face (was) tight and drawn beneath the tan with his hands in a discernible spasm of repressed reaction." Later, as he entered the East Room for a press conference, "reporters ... heard him breathing hard before he faced the microphone and the cameras." By June, now in Cairo, the President is "pallid, languid, visibly indifferent to the people around him." Noting these asides, one is thankful that one's late evening efforts to get the children upstairs to bed are exempt from coverage by the White House press corps.

In fact, it must be said that all this was the merest tommyrot, medically speaking, when Osborne was writing it. Not even the painful and distressing phlebitis was public knowledge then, although one supposes that signs of stress in an embattled President are fair fodder for the reporter's pen.

The risk lies in speculation, without the benefit of real knowledge, about just what these signs mean — if they mean anything at all.

I am glad to say that Osborne's occasional indulgence in this pseudo-medical hoopla is not characteristic of his reporting, which is both serious and sympathetic on the whole. What seems remarkable in retrospect is not that Nixon seemed drawn or pallid or jittery, but that he told his many public whoppers with

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THE LAST NIXON WATCH. By John Osborne. Cartoons by Paul Szep

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President

such steely composure. Not only was the noose of Watergate tightening, there was all along the matter of the President's humiliating embroilment with the IRS authorities.

The two were not, one supposes, equivalent worries; yet the need to act a fiction with regard to the income tax problems may have sprung, as Osborne suggested on April 27, from "the fact that Mr. Nixon personally set forth the philosophy of maximum attainable deduction ... in a 1969 memorandum to John Ehrlichman." The repeated protestation that the President had been the guideless victim of sloppy lawyers and accountants wore thin on that very account. This story came to seem almost as implausible as the parallel suggestion that a man so long so attentive to political trivia could have been so busy being President in June, 1972, that the Watergate coverup took him by surprise.

On this very matter — the likelihood that the President had had a high grade of wool pulled over his eyes by his aides — Osborne cites a revealing memo prepared for the House Judiciary Committee by Alexander Butterfield. It gives some notion of the scope of Nixon's care for detail. Butterfield, warning that he did not himself see the informa-

tion as discreditable (as it wasn't, for that matter), reported that Mr. Nixon "did a memorandum in Belgrade, Yugoslavia, having been impressed by the fine restrooms ... and having the feeling that back here on the Mall we had some rather shabby wooden restrooms." He was, said Butterfield, "thinking always about detail." Indeed!

We know now that perhaps as early as May, if not earlier, Nixon had reason to be worried about his cover story. He had reviewed the tapes of his June 23 conversations with H. R. Haldeman, in which he had instructed Haldeman to get the FBI off "the Democratic break-in thing" by using the CIA as decoy. One of Nixon's first responses to the Supreme Court decision on the tapes, in July, was to telephone Fred Buzhardt, back in Washington, and have him check the same tapes. That opened the final act.

What is striking about Osborne's collected reporting, as a whole, is that it stands up so well in the light of later information. During a presidential crisis it helps a reporter of Osborne's skill to work on the facts for two weeks and to consult his sources at leisure. And by the way, Osborne divulges an interesting professional

secret: At the Nixon White House, "as sources, I always preferred tough reactionaries to talky liberals."

It showed. For although Osborne was reporting for the New Republic, whose editorial views on the Nixon regime were conveniently critical, Osborne himself maintained a certain impartiality. (For instance, he

views the later pardoning of Nixon as "a wise, and right thing," which was hardly the chic view at the time.) Osborne had, to borrow a term of literary criticism, the "negative capability" of understanding and writing with sympathy about programs and policies of which he personally disapproved. Also, Osborne, a native Mississippian, seems to have the deep southerner's appreciation of life's cussedness and tragedy. It enabled him to write with appropriate gravity about the tragedy chronicled here — the slow and painful unmaking of a President.