

W Post
5-18-75

The Faking of the President

BREACH OF FAITH: The Fall of Richard Nixon. By Theodore H. White. Atheneum/Reader's Digest. 373 pp. \$10.95

By GEORGE E. REEDY

IN THEODORE WHITE'S own words, he has "passed successively from loathing for Richard Nixon to respect for him, then to inescapable recognition of his criminal guilt..." It is incumbent upon a public person, which Mr. White is, to explain emotional wrenches of such violence and this book could well be an effort to discharge the obligation.

Under any circumstances it would be a difficult task. The hardcore Nixon following has been silenced, or at least stunned, by the outcome of the Watergate drama. Only a few timid apologists suggest from time to time that preceding presidents were guilty of similar acts—hardly a convincing justification even if it were true. It is far too early for truly deep analysis.

Mr. White complicates the process by framing the book in terms of Mr. Nixon and the Watergate conspiracy, subjects upon which he can shed little light. Some of his facts are "new," in the sense that they have not been revealed before, but they are details which are unlikely to alter present or future judgments. Even his much heralded statement that the former President was "an unstable personality" is far less impressive in the context of the whole volume than in the prepublication excerpts which have appeared in the press.

The result can be classified as "another Watergate book" redeemed only by some fascinating glimpses into the mind of the author—a man who cannot be classified as a "reactionary" or a "right winger"—who once approved so highly of Mr. Nixon. Unfortunately, these glimpses are not developed. It is almost impossible to avoid the feeling that a major work would have resulted had Theodore White set out to write a book about Theodore White instead of a semijournalistic exposition.

A political commitment always has religious overtones and, in explaining Mr. Nixon's admirers, White employs language that would have been familiar to the Manichaeans, the third-century Christian heretics who interpreted the universe as a continuous battle between the forces of light and dark. This theme domi-

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nates the entire book—the concept of the “strange duality of [Nixon’s] personality, the evil and the good, the discipline and the instability, the planned purpose and the vengeful impulse.” Presumably, Mr. Nixon’s “light” side was in the ascendancy, or at least most apparent, when so many people of moderate political tastes voted for him in 1972.

The major battle between the contending forces was in the White House itself where White divides the staff into the forces of light, personified by General Alexander Haig, and the forces of darkness, under the command of H. R. (Bob) Haldeman. The author seems to have gathered most of his information by talking to the forces of light—or possibly forces that were being converted to the light.

“One poked at Pat Buchanan, dedicated, loyal, honest—and after the best long answer he could give, one poked again with the same old question, ‘What went wrong?’ ” he writes. “And, in exasperation, he would burst out, ‘It runs to

White House door.

Even some of these—notably Herb Klein and Robert Finch—were basically white hats but their voices were muted while Haldeman was in the ascendancy. The philosophy of the end justifying the means was firm in the saddle until catastrophe struck and Haig was brought in to replace Haldeman and preside over the liquidation of the administration. This was the point at which the forces of light took over the delicate job of persuading Mr. Nixon to ease himself out of office to make way for a new president.

The transition from Haldeman to Haig covered the period from which White draws most of his material on the “unstable personality” and the staff suspicion that Mr. Nixon was “close to nervous breakdown” themes. The evidence includes a log of all-night telephone calls and later references to aides detecting “excessive drinking” and “many changes in his personality now.” Someone else looking at the same material might just

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the President himself. There’s a mean side to his nature you’ve never seen—I can’t talk about it.’ Or even Ehrlichman, long after it was over, who loved the President, ‘There was another side to him, like the flat, dark side of the moon.’ Or, again, from another, ‘There was a chemistry between him and Haldeman, when they were alone together something happened that brought out the worst in both of them.’ ”

One would like to hear a response from the dark side to this theological disquisition. But the author cannot be blamed for the lack as black hats don’t talk.

White finds the dark people among the advance men and technicians who helped Mr. Nixon achieve his political power. They were the graduates of the “California Southland” school of campaigning where students were taught to win at all costs, “a crew, managerial and able—but very, very tough.” These were the men who did not realize, according to the author, that the dirty tricks which Americans were willing to tolerate during campaigning were supposed to stop at the

come to the conclusion that he was acting like a man in deep trouble.

The “breach of faith” in White’s mind was the failure of Mr. Nixon to live up to the American expectation that a president will live within the law, whatever the means by which he reached the office. There are few who would argue the author’s conclusion that on this point the former chief executive was guilty. History always holds forth the possibility of reopening the book but for the time being it is closed.

There is another question, however, which has barely been explored. It is the political future of millions of disillusioned Americans who once regarded Mr. Nixon as the symbol of a cause. They were obviously seeking something when they voted for him and it is difficult to believe that he offered nothing to satisfy their desires even if they were tricked into looking only at the light side. Perhaps White’s dual personality explanation of Mr. Nixon is a basis for understanding his followers. It is too bad he did not pursue it further.