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# Walking Tall Through Washington,

Reviewed by

Anne Chamberlin

The reviewer is a Washington free-lance writer.

An abiding frustration in the Watergate saga has been its failure as a morality play. How can we teach the kids to obey the "Don't Walk" signs when the leading offender is pardoned, and other sinners, both great and small, keep slipping away into the high tax brackets or repenting in print for advances that would feed an honest poet for life? Instead of being cleansed and redeemed, we're stumbling about on clay feet, shaking wet ashes off our feathers.

Well, Gail Magruder's "A Gift of Love" brings a modest and reassuring note to this scene. We've heard from other Watergate wives about the slowly twisting journey from the White House to jail—never entirely sure how much they knew and when; or what lessons they learned from the truth. Gail Magruder learned a lot, and her book describes how she and Jeb and their four children accepted the disaster, survived its consequences and grew stronger and taller from the experience.

She feels she was quite literally rescued by God, and much of her story is a hymn of thanks for the help. There is no deep mysticism in her experience. She achieves a personal, almost breezy relationship with God, and a simple, lower-case understanding of the role of Christ: "He was born to do the straightening out we couldn't do for ourselves... He had to be here, where we are, so that he could stand in our shoes, take our sins upon himself, and then take our place upon the cross."

She finds God's messages in chance encounters and everyday events. When she falters from exhaustion, He

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## Watergate...and Prison

sends her fresh strength. He keeps the basement from flooding the whole time that Jeb is in jail. Looking back, she realizes that there were earlier signals, if only she'd been listening more carefully.

She hadn't wanted to come to Washington in the first place. She mostly wanted to be a good wife and mother, with a husband who came home from work in time to share in family life. Jeb's love of politics ("If he could have made a living at it, he would have done it full-time") had already nearly wrecked their marriage. When Haldeman asked him to come to Washington as special assistant to the President he accepts without even calling home. It meant a \$10,000 cut in pay and \$5,000 unreimbursed moving expenses, and all her jewelry disappeared the day the packers came.

Once here, in the thick of things, she was beguiled by the royal perks, but not swept off her feet. "One simply floats unobstructed," she observes. The magic White House phone call commands the best tables at Sans Souci; the tickets to the Kennedy Center; the limousines to the airport, with a flag on the fender. The flights to San Clemente in an Air Force courier plane were "far more comfortable and spacious than any commercial flight." The seats were assigned according to rank, with telephones everywhere, so the word could go forth from on high.

She learned about those calls from aloft on their family outings. They spotted every phone booth on all the bicycle trails to be ready for the squawk from the page-boy Jeb carried, day and night, everywhere he went. She felt the phone was "a toy in the hands of children."

Between the White House "working dinners" and having their names in the Green Book, they were out five nights a week, leaving their four young children with a live-in nurse. The rewards were "a sense of being at the very core of the world's most important events and decisions," and the glamor of strawberries and champagne on the Queen's birthday and the other exotic rites along Embassy Row.

President Nixon appears only once. She meets him in a White House receiving line and is awed that with all the other important things on his mind, he inquires how their eldest son is doing in school. Later she learns that his aide Steve Bull briefs him before these gatherings, supplying useful conversation tips like this.

She keeps thinking that the frantic pace is at the root of their difficulties. Jeb was too rushed to enjoy their visits to museums but "looking back on it convinces me that everyone needs to make time for the calming influence of art in his life."

Instead, there was an es-

calating madness. Jeb lies to the grand jury and the wages of sin are tranquilizers, sleeping pills and liquor. She makes no claim that his decision to tell the truth was a profile in courage, but at least, she points out crisply, he "was the first to cooperate fully, without trying to bargain for immunity," unlike John Dean, who got "some conveniences which became obvious later." In any case, the truth made him sleep better.

She was less than charmed by the prosecutors, who were "liberal Democrats," while Jeb was a "Nixon Republican, which meant he was filth."

Waiting for Jeb to be sentenced, their lives take on a

lunatic counterpoint. Kind letters pour in; people send them Bibles. Others shun them or taunt their children. Jeb's book is about to appear, so they agree to have Dick Cavett tape a show in their house.

Twenty-four hours before the event she finds a 40-foot moving van anchored out front, inch-thick black cables taped to the freshly-painted walls, technicians coming and going, neighborhood dogs parading through the front door which can't be closed because of the cables, and a Montgomery County policeman threatening to arrest Jeb for a \$12 overdue parking ticket. When Dick Cavett arrives, he finds their house too hot

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## Book World

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*A GIFT OF LOVE. By Gail Magruder*

(Holman/Lippincott. 160 pp. \$7.95)

and retires to his air-conditioned limousine until time for the taping to start.

To learn about the Land of the Free, one should do some time in its jails, and her description of prison life is the most gripping part of her book. (Until Jeb's lawyers intervened, he was to be carted off to Allenwood in handcuffs and leg irons, with a chain around his waist.)

The Allenwood visiting rooms, the foul-smelling toilets, the junk food dispensers, could be any "rest

stop" on U. S. 95. The visiting rules were as cruel and capricious as the indeterminate sentences and the parole policies. Some prisoners were more equal than others, with the poor and the black and the ignorant at the bottom of the heap. At the jail picnics. "The poor arrived in broken-down cars and ate simple sandwiches, sitting on the ground or on rocks. The OC—organized crime—visitors came in big, expensive cars, ready to prepare a sumptuous feast."

It was a day's journey to get there and people without cars were out of luck. "The prison system works against us so effectively that the loss of a man's family almost becomes a part of his sentence."

Later, Jeb is transferred to Holabird in Maryland, where there were other Watergate alumni and a curious collection of mafia hit men who had rows of Gucci loafers in their closets and cooked each other elaborate meals, which they took turns shopping for, under armed guard.

Relations are cool among the Watergaters, and she is not above noting the occasional falls from grace of

Charles Colson, God's other recruit. But she and Jeb and their children develop a warm and touching relationship with the tough and alien mafia men. When Jeb is finally freed they all realize that these prison bonds won't let them go.

Jeb now works with Young Life, a Christian service organization for teen-agers, in Colorado (where God helped them find the perfect house). Gail still corresponds with their prison friends. "These men are my brothers. And my brothers are hurting." She has already asked God how she can help them, and perhaps by now she's had a reply.