

Faithful Figaro

By William Safire

ESSAY

WASHINGTON—"The President does not dye his hair."

This statement, delivered without equivocation or mental reservation, comes from the only person besides the President himself who can be said to "know for sure"—the White House barber, Milton Pitts.

If it were up to Mr. Pitts, a native South Carolinian with gentle hands and firm loyalties, his most celebrated customer would indeed employ at least a rinse—not to cover up the silver showing through the black hair but in the opposite direction, to speed up the graying process.

However, Mr. Nixon will permit no tampering with the evidence of age, either to recapture lost youth or to gain the softened image and the deference due to the silver-maned.

Coloration aside, the President trusts Mr. Pitts completely, to the point of waving aside the mirror ritualistically held up at the end of the haircut, despite a natural human urge to see what it looks like in back.

This week, before delivering the State of the Union address to the Congress and the nation, President Nixon once again placed his appearance in Mr. Pitts' hands, visiting the small barber shop in the basement of the White House, a few paces from the situation room. As always, Mr. Pitts reports, the President was friendly under the blue sheet to the man with the razor in his hand.

The barber puts on a jacket with a Presidential seal when Mr. Nixon comes to be trimmed; for all his other customers in the White House, Mr. Pitts works in his shirtsleeves. Under his ministrations, the hairlines of Al Haig and Ron Ziegler have steadily changed from a square close-crop in 1969 to a modish fullness today. A haircut and shampoo costs them \$7.50 (no free barbering, as in the Senate) and although Mr. Pitts is too discreet to say, it is known that Henry Kissinger spends about \$40 a week in the barber's chair.

Access to the Presidential barber is one of those subtle status symbols in Washington: "Your hair doesn't seem so curly, Henry," is offhandedly answered with, "I just leave it up to the President's barber." All the other "perks" of office—the chic little restaurant called a "mess," the special line to the White House switchboard on your telephone, the parking space snuggled up against the West Wing—are terminated upon departure. However, the White House haircutting need not end with an aide's banishment or resignation.

Mr. Pitts runs a three-chair barber shop outside the White House and attends it four days a week when he is not on his Presidential assignment.

There, just three blocks from the White House, one can join the outcasts of Poker Flat, the men whose last link with past power is evoked in the nipping of the Pitts scissors.

I went in the other day for a haircut and met former Counsel Charles Colson stepping out of the chair (still no sideburns—Chuck won't give up his leatherneck traditions). Not long ago, John Ehrlichman, as he paid one of his regular visits to Washington, included the Pitts emporium on his itinerary.

Looking at the Pitts appointment book, I saw haircuts scheduled for CREEPsman Jeb Magruder and title-conveyor Ed Morgan, regular customers, as well as the plumbers' Egil Krogh, who will soon be getting his haircuts elsewhere.

In many cases, these former White House aides are not able to contact each other; they might have to tell a grand jury what transpired in any conversation, or they worry about being recorded by each other, or tapped by who-knows-who. So the Pitts barber shop becomes a place for innocent messages:

"Tell Bud he was great on '60 Minutes.'" Or, "When Morgan comes in, tell him not to unburden his heart and soul to every reporter he runs into." Or, "If you see my old secretary over there, say hello for me."

Sitting in Mr. Pitts' barber chair, looking at an autographed picture of Richard Nixon he proudly displays on the wall, a former aide or ex-Cabinet officer can—for a precious half-hour—forget all about the events that sheared off Samson's locks and turned West Executive Avenue into the Boulevard of Broken Dreams.

If you close your eyes and listen to the familiar voice of the President's barber chat about the people who used to be the movers and shakers; if you think about how you'll tell your wife that you got a haircut from the President's barber today, singing along with Barbra Streisand "The Way We Were"; if you let his "hot comb" blow away the vicious vendetta that eviscerated virtue-like venality—

Ah, then, you realize that Mr. Pitts is not selling merely haircuts and shampoos but memories of the euphoria of being at the center of power when some exciting things were done.