

Frank Johnston—The Washington Post

Seven Days In August

And suddenly it was over. ¶ Sitting for the last time behind his desk in the Oval Office, a taut smile flickering at his lips, Richard Milhous Nixon, 61, looked wanly into the television cameras and brought the long ordeal of Watergate to its end. ¶ He resigned his ruined Presidency in disgrace—the first man ever driven from the office in the 198 years of the American Republic—and passed the mantle to his hand-chosen successor, Gerald Ford. ¶ The transfer of power

NATIONAL AFFAIRS

played out in moments, of the highest political drama—seven days in August in which Nixon was forced first to admit his complicity in the Watergate crimes, then to stand down and retire from public life after one last, teary farewell to his troops. His fall was achieved by a kind of constitutional coup d'état, in which his own topmost aides were the principal catalysts. But the passage from the Nixon to the Ford Presidency was swiftly and smoothly achieved, and the U.S. survived the gravest governmental crisis in its history. "Our long national nightmare is over," said Ford in a short, homiletic speech at his swearing-in. "Our Constitution works."

The new President, a stolid Main Street Republican of



Off to work: Binding up the wounds

61, had no ambition for the role history had thrust upon him, and scant time to prepare himself for it. But he plunged quickly into the first business of his Presidency—the reconciliation of a people divided by a shattering political scandal. His first official acts were acts of continuity; he kept Henry Kissinger in place, along with most of the Nixon Cabinet and staff, and signaled a steady-as-you-go course in foreign and domestic affairs. But he brought his own square-cut, straight-shooting political style with him, and it swept like a cornfield breeze through the Byzantine corridors of the Nixon White House. The change was evident from Ford's earliest words as the nation's 38th President—the pledge "to follow my instincts of openness and candor . . . in all my public and private acts."

His ascent was the end result of five years of government of quite another sort—a government in which secrecy

was the norm and lies became a legitimate instrument of power. The pattern in the end engulfed Nixon himself and was his downfall, in a denouement that was very nearly Shakespearean. The irony of his last days was that it was not his enemies who accomplished his removal but his most senior and most loyal courtiers: they forced his gunpoint confession, and they orchestrated the backstairs maneuvering that eased him from office for what they perceived to be his own good and the nation's.

The impulse of the nation, with Nixon's disgrace, was to rally behind the new President, and to share his faith that the system had brought an end to a national nightmare. The response of friend and foe alike to Nixon's

resignation was overwhelmingly one of relief, both at his having ended the agony of Watergate and at the shreds of grace with which he made his sorry exit. And in the end, it was the Constitution that brought him low. He pushed its checks and balances to their limits and beyond, daring both the Congress and the Supreme Court to challenge him. That dare was his downfall: it was Congress that brought him to the brink of impeachment for the corruption of his Presidency, and the Court that forced out the evidence that would have guaranteed his removal had he not resigned.

Grace but no contrition marked his surrender

And the legacy of Watergate did not end with the departure of Richard Nixon. There was grace but no contrition in his surrender—no mention at all of the scandals that had dishonored the Vice Presidency, the Cabinet, the White House staff, the FBI, the CIA, the Department of Justice, the courts and finally the Presidency itself. Nixon referred only twice to what he chose to call "the Watergate matter" and never once to the certainty of his impeachment no more than two weeks hence; instead, he assigned his ruin to the loss of his "political base" and to the resulting paralysis of his Presidency. Nor did he allude to the profound effect his fall is likely to have on America's constitutional order. He will be succeeded by a man of Congress in Ford and at least an interlude of Congressional ascendancy; the Imperial Presidency, for better or worse, may have fallen with him.

That Nixon's resignation was the overriding will of the people was no longer in question. A Gallup telephone poll of 550 households, conducted for NEWSWEEK in the days immediately following the President's departure, found a stunning 79-13 majority in agreement that he had taken the proper course. There was little stomach for prosecuting him for the Watergate crimes—a 55-37 majority favored leaving him alone—but neither was there great sympathy for the argument that he was hounded unfairly from office. Americans agreed by 65-22 that his actions were serious enough to warrant his quitting, and by 56-33 that he was not the victim of a case trumped up by his enemies. There was little open jubilation at Ford's arrival, or at Nixon's passing from the stage of history after 28 tempestuous

With a last wave, Nixon bids farewell to the White House. After taking the oath of office, President Ford (overleaf) addresses the nation in a 'talk among friends.'

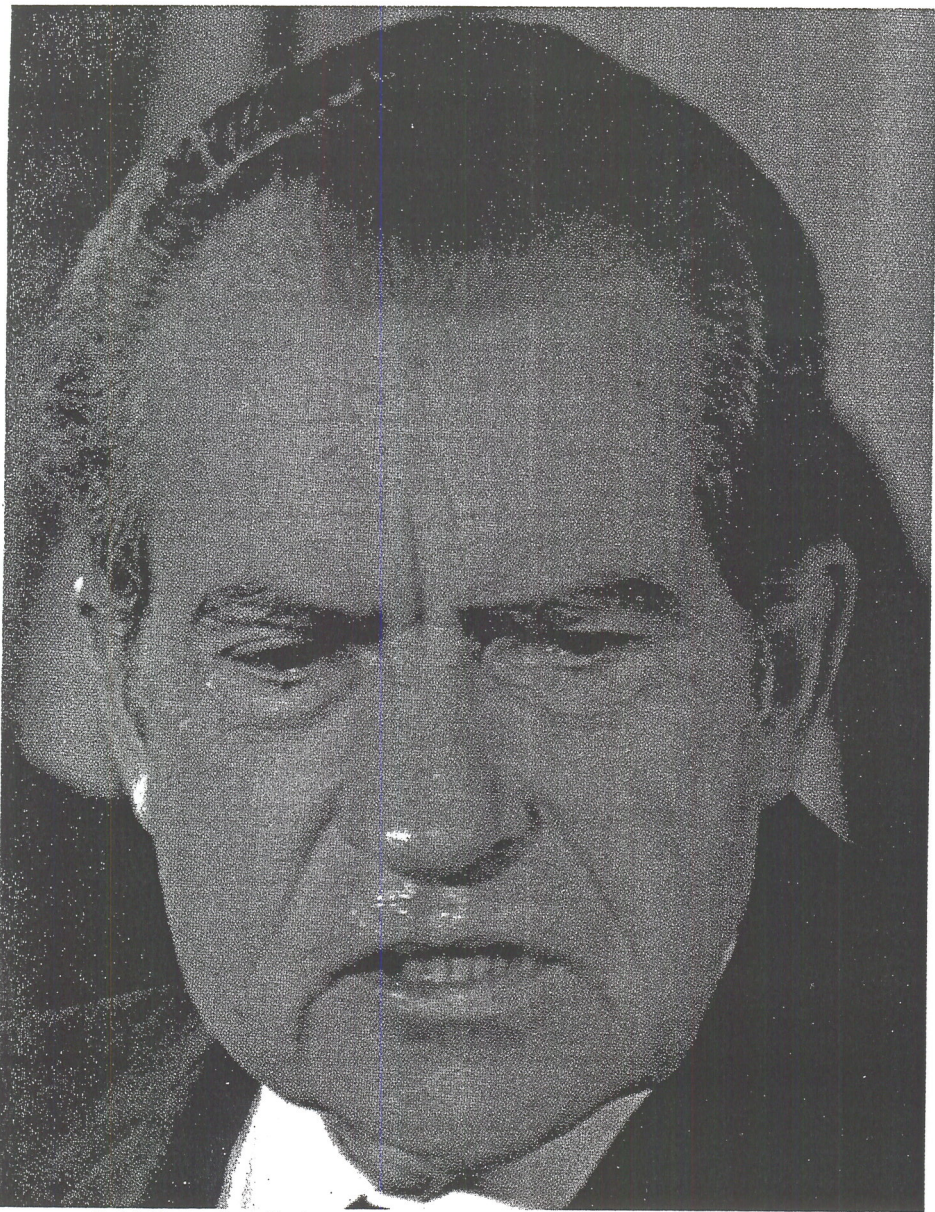
Wally McNamee—Newsweek; Yoichi Okamoto (overleaf)

Newsweek, August 19, 1974



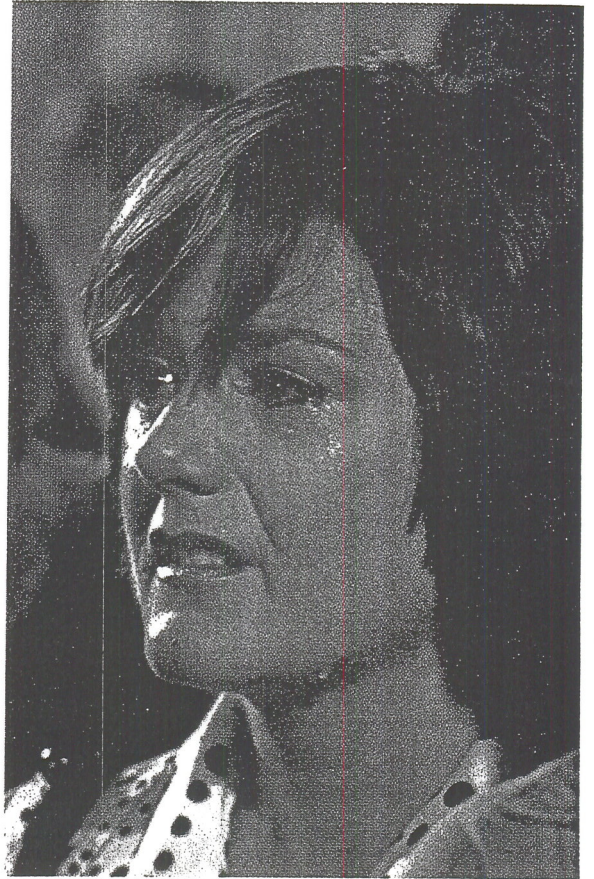






Fred J. Maroon—Louis Mercier

In the final hours of his Presidency, Richard Nixon says 'au revoir' to his grieving staff. David and Julie Eisenhower and the Fords bid the Nixons good-by on the White House lawn as Rose Mary Woods fights back a tear. And a haggard, subdued Ron Ziegler meets newsmen for the last time as Presidential press secretary.



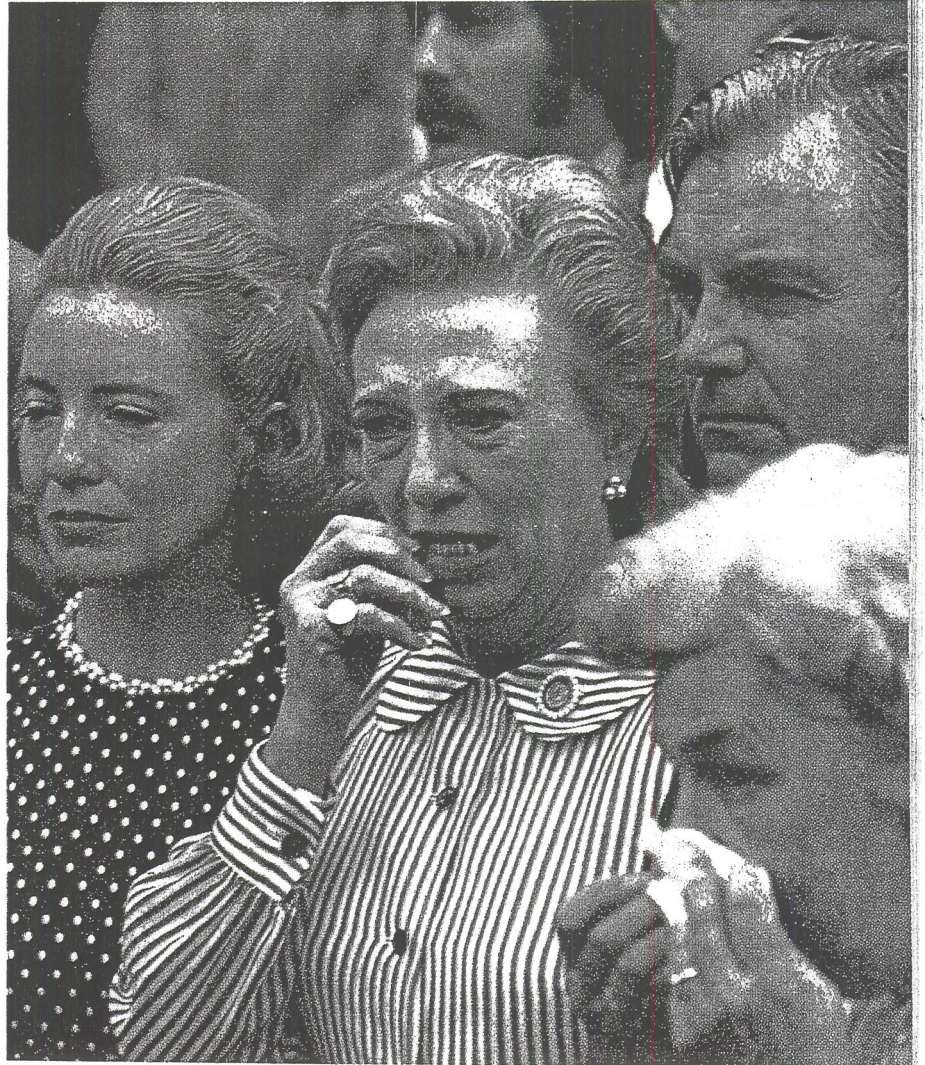
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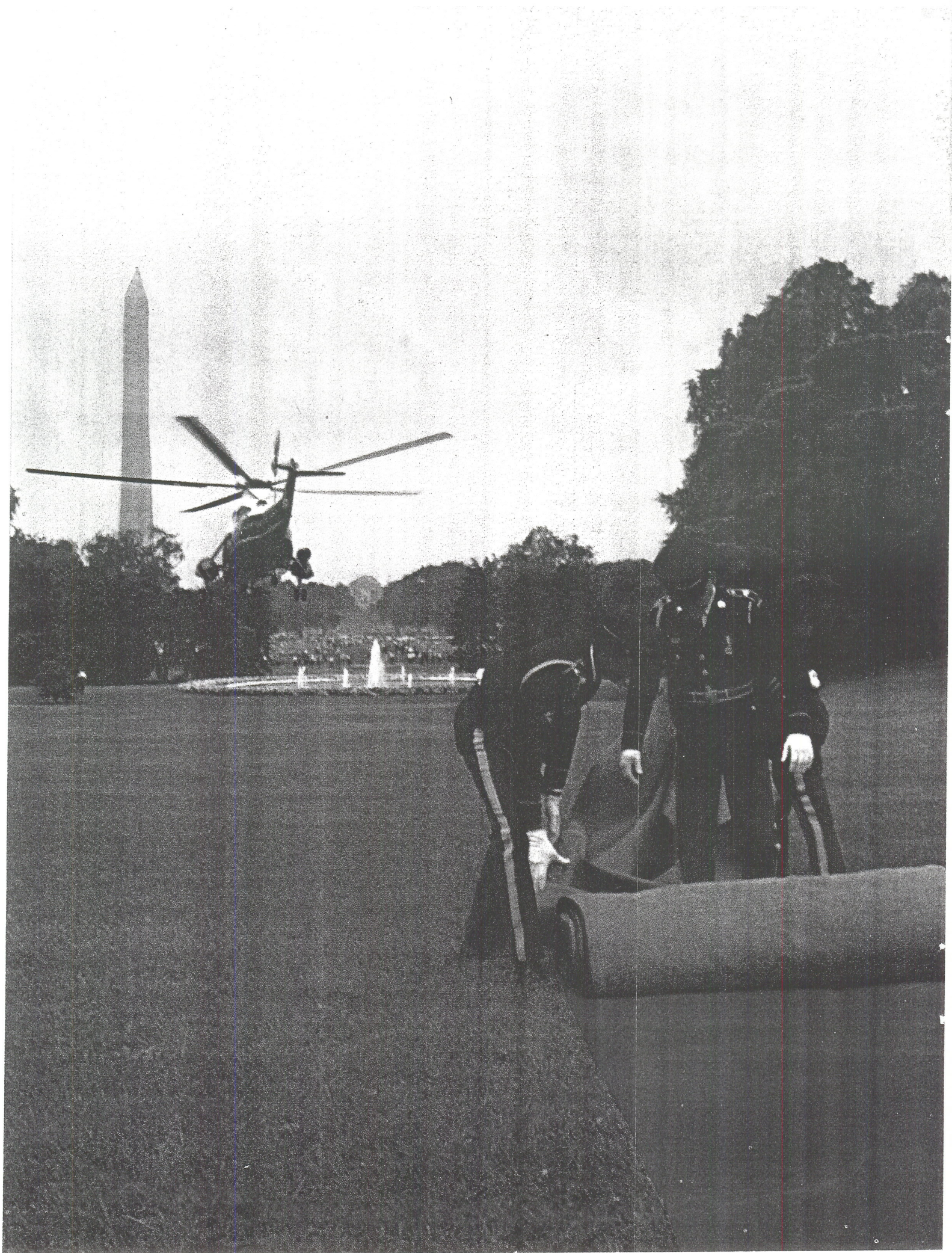
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Photos by Wally McNamee—Newsweek





years. A mostly young and hirsute crowd of 1,000 danced in the night outside the White House gates, whooping "Jail to the Chief!" and "Executive deleted!" But what Americans more commonly experienced was less pleasure than surcease from pain. Stock prices jumped dizzily at the first rumors that Nixon might quit, then fell back after he did it. A mood of forgiveness stole over Capitol Hill; one Senate Republican who had wished for the resignation found only melancholy in it, and said: "He proved himself a man." Broadway theaters interrupted performances and fell still during the speech, and the posh Coq D'Or bar in Chicago's Drake Hotel stopped selling drinks. In Yorba Linda, Calif., a woman snapped a picture of Nixon's birthplace. "I was afraid," she said, "that they just might take down the sign tomorrow."

Nixon's humiliation was by then complete past celebration even by his enemies. He ended his 2,027 days in the White House bereft of support and caught in a lie of his own fabrication; it was the measure of his isolation at the last that his own men Alexander Haig and James St. Clair played leading roles in bringing him to his decision to stand down. They had only just discovered what Nixon had known for nearly three months and kept secret from everybody—that his White House tapes indeed contained the elusive "smoking weapon" implicating him directly and convincingly in the Watergate cover-up in its very earliest days. It was they who forced Mr. Nixon to lay the evidence on public view, with a covering confession that he had concealed it even from them; that it was "at variance" with two years' denials of his guilt, and that his last hope was that the Senate would judge impeachment too drastic a punishment for the crime.

The princes of his own party gave him the word point-blank

The tapes and the confession brought the last of his support crashing down, and drove him to resignation in the span of 72 hours. The ten Republicans who had defended him in the televised House Judiciary Committee hearings deserted him overnight. The princes of his own party told him point-blank that he could count on no more than ten votes against impeachment on the House floor, and fifteen against conviction in the Senate. Some of his most trusted retainers—Haig, St. Clair, Kissinger, even Ronald Ziegler—pressed him delicately to step down, to spare himself and the Republic the ordeal of a long and finally hopeless Senate trial. The political base he mourned in his resignation speech dwindled nearly to nothing; hardly anybody but his own family, his daughter Julie most ardent among them, urged him to prolong the struggle—and at last, after days in somber isolation, he surrendered.

The panoply of office fell away overnight. It was a lonely and suddenly vulnerable Nixon who bade a wet-eyed farewell to his assembled staff and Cabinet, then boarded Air Force One for the last time and headed westward with the sun to California. His flight there was something considerably less than an escape from his troubles; six-figure mortgage and tax bills await him, and at least the possibility of criminal prosecution as well. The appetite for the pursuit was slaked in great measure by his resignation. But special prosecutor Leon Jaworski was at pains to say that Nixon was leaving without a deal for shelter, and the grand jury that named him a co-conspirator in the cover-up would like at least to hear the new taped evidence that brought him down.

That evidence, as it developed, consisted of three recordings of talks between Nixon and his onetime chief of staff H.R. (Bob) Haldeman on June 23, 1972, just six days after

As White House guards roll up the red carpet, the Nixons' helicopter flies off to Andrews Air Force Base on the first leg of their long journey home to California.

Don Carl Steffen

Newsweek, August 19, 1974 □

A POPULAR DECISION

In a special survey for NEWSWEEK, The Gallup Organization questioned 550 Americans by telephone about their reactions to the Nixon resignation. The results:

1. Do you think Nixon did the best thing by resigning, or do you think it would have been better if he had stayed on in office?

Should have resigned	79%	Should have stayed	13%
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2. Do you think Nixon's actions regarding Watergate were, or were not, serious enough to warrant his resignation?

Were serious enough	65%	Were not	22%
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3. Do you think Nixon's political enemies unfairly exaggerated his actions in order to force him out of office?

Yes	33%	No	56%
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4. Do you think it should be agreed not to press an investigation of possible criminal charges against him?

Do not press investigation	55%	Press investigation	37%
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5. As the new President, Gerald Ford will nominate someone to assume the office of Vice President. Which one of these six men would you most like him to nominate as Vice President—Howard Baker, George Bush, Barry Goldwater, Ronald Reagan, Elliot Richardson or Nelson Rockefeller?

Baker	11%	Reagan	12%
Bush	1%	Richardson	11%
Goldwater	23%	Rockefeller	18%

Don't know omitted

the Watergate break-in. In the first and most damning, Haldeman told the President that John Mitchell might have been involved in the operation, and that the FBI was going off in "some directions we don't want it to go"—notably tracking the laundered cash that financed the burglary back to Mitchell's Committee for the Re-election of the President. The two men evolved a strategy for using the CIA to abort the FBI inquiry, on the trumped-up plea that it might compromise some covert agency operation. "Right, fine," said Nixon when Haldeman ventured the plan, and later he embraced it as his own—"They should call the FBI in and [unintelligible] don't go any further into this case period!"

The June tapes were among a lot of 64 subpoenaed by Jaworski last spring; Nixon listened to them along with a dozen or so others early in May, and quite clearly understood their devastating potential. His direct order to Haldeman to rein in the bureau was manifestly the "murder weapon" his defenders insisted was missing from the mass of circumstantial evidence against him. It shredded his prior claim that he had narrowed the FBI inquiry only out of genuine concern for national security, not to keep the lid on the Watergate

THE WHITE HOUSE

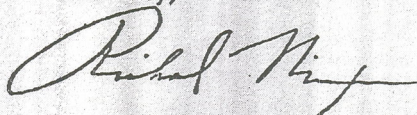
WASHINGTON

August 9, 1974

Dear Mr. Secretary:

I hereby resign the Office of President of the United States.

Sincerely,



The Honorable Henry A. Kissinger
The Secretary of State
Washington, D. C. 20520

The resignation letter: Visa for a sorry exit

mess. And it laid waste to a year's public protestations that he didn't know a cover-up was on until John Dean told him about it in March 1973, nine months later.

The President's response to his discovery was what he euphemistically described last week as a "serious act of omission"—a polite phrase for concealing critical evidence from the impeachment inquiry, the courts, and even his own defenders. He told nobody of his discovery.* He denied straight-out to St. Clair that the conversations were potentially incriminating. He broke off what seemed promising negotiations toward a compromise settlement with Jaworski. "I've got better things to do than listen to tapes," he said to General Haig. "Let's go to the [Supreme] Court."

* 6-7 MAY

He debated for a day whether to obey the Supreme Court

He did, to disastrous effect for his cause. His lawyers warned him that his chances in the Court were dim, but he elected to credit other, rosier intelligence estimates, and was taken off-guard when his own Chief Justice, Warren Burger, brought in the 8-0 judgment against him on July 24. He and his counselors spent most of a day in San Clemente debating whether he ought to obey the highest court in the land; Nixon, who alone knew the secret of the tapes, was said to have been alone in arguing for resistance. He capitulated only when St. Clair threatened to quit as defense counsel—and thus locked himself into the downhill train of events that was to be his undoing.

The first of his own people to find him out was St. Clair's co-counsel J. Fred Buzhardt, who was assigned to check the tapes out of their maximum-security vault and begin screening them for delivery. In late July Buzhardt listened to the three from June 23 and immediately saw their import; that noonday, he broke the news to staffers Dean Burch and Leonard Garment over a glum luncheon in the White House mess, and they reached a single conclusion: Nixon had no choice but to resign. Buzhardt shortly put Haig in the picture, and Haig in turn told St. Clair. All of them arrived at a common judgment, that Nixon would be impeached and convicted if he did not quit. What they could

not immediately settle on was a way to bring the desperation of his situation home to him.

Some of his senior people were in fact worried whether Nixon was fully in touch with reality, and their anxiety mounted as reality turned nastier—the Court decision, the forced surrender of the tapes, the bipartisan Judiciary votes to impeach even without a smoking gun. The President seemed to some of them to lose heart for the daily conduct of government; the locus of power in the White House shifted to Haig, and Kissinger was said to be fretful at Nixon's growing inattention to the daily diplomatic cable traffic. To one old and loyal hand, the President seemed "a very bewildered man," moving hollow-eyed and distracted through his days; this aide, knowing the boss's secret, wondered privately whether there wasn't something self-destructive in his behavior in the last weeks of his Presidency—whether he might not even have wished for death by phlebitis on his recent travels abroad. "Somewhere along the way, he lost touch," this staffer confided in the thick of Nixon's gathering troubles. "He just doesn't know. He just doesn't know."

The problem for Nixon's people was to force his attention to the dangers crowding in around him. The device they chose was to go outside their own circle and leak the secret of the telltale tapes to Rep. Charles Wiggins, the silvery-

dent is talking about," he said. Haig nodded, and St. Clair unhappily agreed: "Yes, it is clear."

What followed was a gloomy forecast of the consequences of divulging what was in the recordings. Wiggins guessed that they would set off a fire storm unmatched since the Saturday Night Massacre, and that the President had better consider resigning before he was impeached and removed. Haig and St. Clair said they understood, but that it was difficult for a staff man or a lawyer to tell him so. Neither had they settled when or how to go public. "Does he have another Checkers speech in him?" Wiggins asked acidly; nevertheless, he agreed to sit on the story over the weekend.

The teary Wiggins told nobody about what he had learned

Wiggins walked out to his car and headed back to his office, his eyes suddenly rimming with tears. He found his desk littered with papers outlining the President's defense in the coming House floor fight; he stared at them for a moment, then started balling them up and pitching them into a waste-



Alan Green—Gamma

A show of jubilation at the White House gates: On the whole, less pleasure than surcease from pain

haired Californian who had led the Nixon defense in the Judiciary Committee debates; their ostensible purpose was to gauge how the committee and the Congress might react, but the collateral benefit lay in what they knew would be Wiggins's reaction—the threat to go public unless the President did first.

St. Clair and Haig accordingly summoned the congressman to the White House, and met him over a coffee table in the general's office. Haig offered some pleasantries about how much he and the President had appreciated Wiggins's gallantry in a lost cause; then St. Clair broke the news that they had come across some new and possibly significant evidence and shoved five or six typescript pages across the table to Wiggins—transcripts of the June 23 tapes.

Wiggins read them through once, then again, his heart sinking; only gradually did it occur to him that Haig and St. Clair too shared his first reaction—a sense of betrayal and dismay. He stared icily at them, asked what they planned to do and posed two equally bleak alternatives: surrender the material to the committee—or plead the Fifth Amendment. St. Clair answered that they had already crossed that Rubicon—that the tapes had been delivered to Judge John J. Sirica under the Jaworski subpoena, and would be yielded to the committee as well. Wiggins scanned the pages one more time. "There is just no misunderstanding of what the Presi-

basket. He had a staffer cancel a series of briefings he had laid on for others of the President's defenders. He said nothing to anybody about what he had learned; instead, he went home, and next day began composing a call on Nixon to lay aside planning for his trial—and to begin preparations for the orderly transition of power to Gerald Ford.

The President's men had their secret weapon in Wiggins, and as last week began they convened for a war council at Camp David determined to force Nixon to confront his narrowing alternatives. He had preceded them to the Catskills by a day with his family and seemed almost preternaturally calm; he urged his staff men to bring along their own wives and children, rather as though it were an outing in the country he were laying on rather than a last, desperate conference on the gathering crisis of his Presidency.

But finally they got down to cases—Haig closeted alone with the President in Aspen Lodge for much of the day, his others (St. Clair, speechwriters Ray Price and Patrick Buchanan) working at one remove and passing their views into the boss by proxy. Haig's run-through of the situation was simple and brutally direct. The situation was critical. The tapes had been shown to Wiggins; he had found them "deastating" and felt they had totally altered the political calculus—had advanced the speed and the certainty of the President's impeachment. The options left open to the President

were narrow in the extreme: publish the June 23 material, then ask for an early trial in the Senate—or resign.

The President, well-placed sources told NEWSWEEK, was taken aback; he showed no keen sense of how swiftly the tide was running against him. He begged for more time—just a month more, to arrange an orderly exit or to devise some new strategy for his trial. But Haig pressed for an immediate decision. The June tapes had to be published, he said. Wiggins, for one thing, knew about them and would talk if the White House did not; St. Clair, for another, would be forced to quit if they were kept secret, and while he would not go public with his reasons, his defection alone would be read as damning to the defense. Haig even enlisted Kissinger in the cause, getting him on the line and bearing his arguments to the chief.

Nixon finally agreed to the publication of the tapes next day—a decision that, as his people surely knew, was to seal his fate. Haig put in a call to House Minority Leader John Rhodes, who had been agonizing toward a decision against impeachment and had scheduled a press conference to announce it next day; the general alerted him that a “major development” was in the works, and Rhodes promptly came down with a politic sore throat that forced him to cancel out. St. Clair, Price and Buchanan fell to work drafting the statement, and word went out to the legal-staff steno pool to rush the transcripts together.

The President himself remained anesthetized to his danger; he thought, said one adviser, “that things would calm down in a couple of weeks and he’d be able to hang on to his support once the dust settled.” But his people understood that they had entered him upon the end-game, and they began preparing Washington for it. Haig broke the news to Ford, just back from a weekend trip to Mississippi and Louisiana; the Vice President was miffed at having been left out till then, but that night his people began preparing for a transition he had doubted ever would come. Afterward, Haig assembled 100 topside staffers and, looking haggard and mournful, alerted them that “material damaging to us” was about to come out. He asked them only to stay at their desks through the storm, out of loyalty to the nation and the office. The general exited to a standing ovation. “Al,” said one staffer, “is now the lame-duck President.”

Arends turned pale and said, ‘I feel sick’; Wiggins cried anew

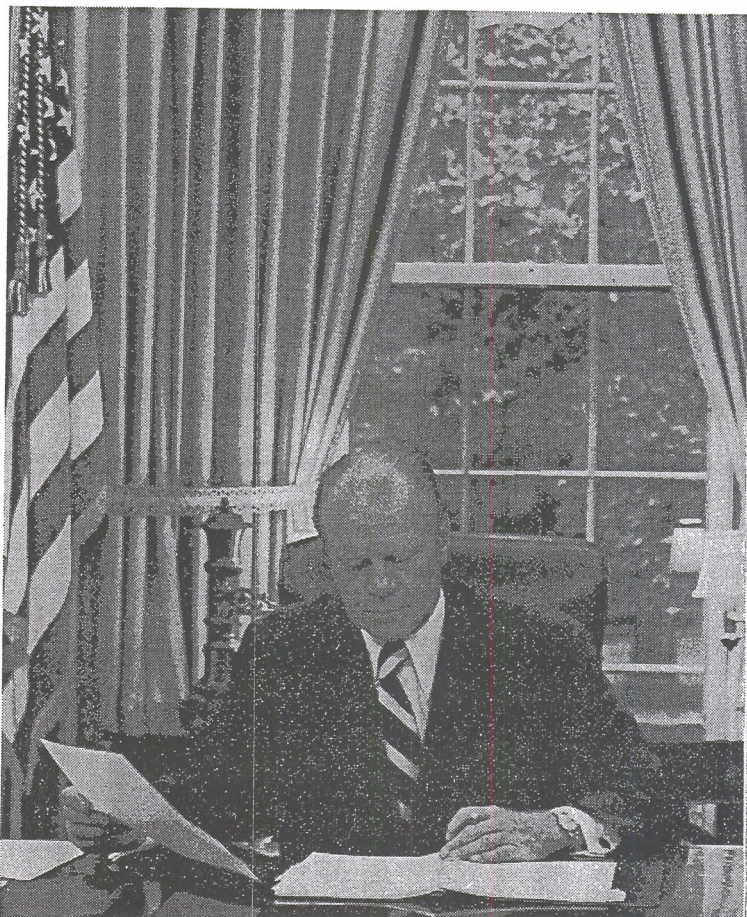
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At the same time, St. Clair, Buzhardt and White House lobbyist William Timmons began their unhappy rounds of the Hill. They went first to the offices of House Minority Whip Leslie Arends, who had assembled all but one of the ten Judiciary Republicans who had stood with the President against impeachment. St. Clair did a quick précis of the Nixon confessional and confirmed that he would have quit if the President hadn’t assented to issuing it. Arends, a spry 78 and a stubborn Nixon loyalist, turned pale and said, “I feel sick.” Wiggins, his eyes welling over again, said the President had to quit; if not, he would have to vote for impeachment. One by one, the others agreed; there was not a single dissenter in the room.

The White House party moved dolefully on to a meeting of the Senate GOP hierarchy in Minority Leader Hugh Scott’s richly brocaded offices. St. Clair quickly outlined the new evidence and confessed his own “surprise and chagrin” at having been kept in the dark so long. For a long moment, the room fell dead silent; the only sound in the stillness was Scott drawing gently on his pipe. Somebody asked why St. Clair had not in fact quit on the spot. “I suppose human nature is human nature,” he said, forcing a smile. “The President isn’t the first client who ever withheld information from his attorney.” Somebody else asked whether Nixon might not now at last step down. St. Clair said it was not his prerogative even to ask, but he was convinced that the President meant

to hang on till the end—and that his trial might drag out for six months. “Jesus Christ, do you really mean that?” roared one of the leaders. St. Clair answered softly, “Yes.”

They were still in the room when the White House press office delivered the smoking weapon and the spare covering apologia to the world. Nixon conceded in it that he had pronounced his massive April 30 book of transcripts the whole story of Watergate and had sat on his subsequent discovery of the three June recordings. “As a result,” he admitted, “those arguing my case, as well as those passing judgment on the case, did so with information that was incomplete and in some respects erroneous.” He did not contest what the tapes clearly showed—that his motive in throwing the FBI off the scent had been “limiting possible public exposure” of what his people had done—and he conceded that his impeachment was now a foregone conclusion in the House. What the President begged of the Senate was not so much absolution



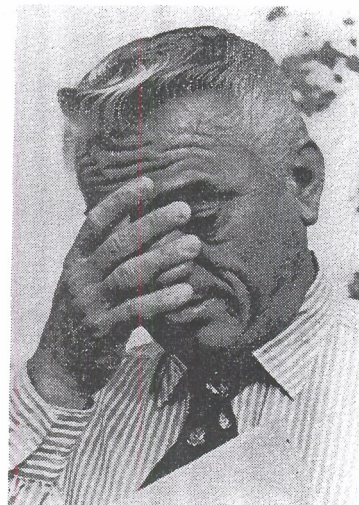
In the Oval Office: ‘Our national nightmare is over’

as mercy—the judgment “that the record, in its entirety, does not justify the extreme step of impeachment and removal of a President.”

The response was swift and furious: in the space of 24 hours, Nixon’s last, decimated support collapsed, and his conviction at trial became a certainty. Wiggins led the mass defections, choking down sobs as he read his call for the President’s resignation. The others of Judiciary’s Nixon Ten quickly followed; one of them, Michigan’s Edward Hutchinson, said he felt “deceived.” Leaders in both houses convened to speed and foreshorten the impeachment process and get the nasty business of removing a President over by Election Day. Barry Goldwater stormed through his office thundering, “This man must go!” Kansas’s Robert Dole waved a copy of the statement at a cluster of colleagues in the Senate GOP cloakroom and asked tartly, “Why doesn’t he just say, ‘I quit’? It would save a lot of paper.” John Rhodes magically recovered his voice, rescheduled his news confer-



Buzhardt: First to know



AP Photos

Wiggins: Pain and sorrow

Haig: After pleasantries, dropping the bomb

The President, as it happened, had reached the last high-water mark of his resistance to the inevitable. He departed the Cabinet session looking serene and closeted himself through a long afternoon, locked away from practically everybody but his family and, for a half hour, his indomitably loyal cheerleader Rabbi Baruch Korff. "Everyone but the President was in the real world by then," said one source. His people accordingly agonized belowstairs at how to get him in it, too—and in the end they abandoned their deference and accelerated the coup they had already set in motion.

Later that day, Haig and Timmons broke into the President's solitude with a blunt briefing as to just how hopeless his position had become. "It was a devastating session," one official told NEWSWEEK. "They told him it was all over." The President listened in deepening despond, and for once seemed to his people to hear. He made no final decision, but the delegation came away all but certain that he would be gone within 48 hours—that he wanted only another day in which to contact old friends and supporters and to brace his family for the end. That evening, the order went out from Haig to Ray Price: start writing the draft of a resignation statement.

'The President,' Haig told Scott, 'needs a triggering mechanism'

7 AUG

The choreography continued and accelerated the next day, the President's men behaving as though the decision were locked in—and taking appropriate precautions against its getting unlocked. Haig caught Ford en route to Capitol Hill for breakfast and asked over the Veep's limousine phone if he would come around to the White House right away. Ford asked plaintively if it couldn't wait. Haig said no; Ford turned back down Pennsylvania Avenue—and was advised for the first time that the Presidency might shortly pass to him. Next, Haig telephoned Hugh Scott to hold himself ready to lead a small delegation down from the Hill to advise Nixon of the soaring odds against his survival. "The President," said the general, "is leaning strongly to the conclusion that his only available option is resignation . . . [but he] needs a triggering mechanism. He wants to hear from the leaders just how bleak the situation really is."

The summons came, and in the gray late afternoon the limousines nosed onto the White House grounds, depositing

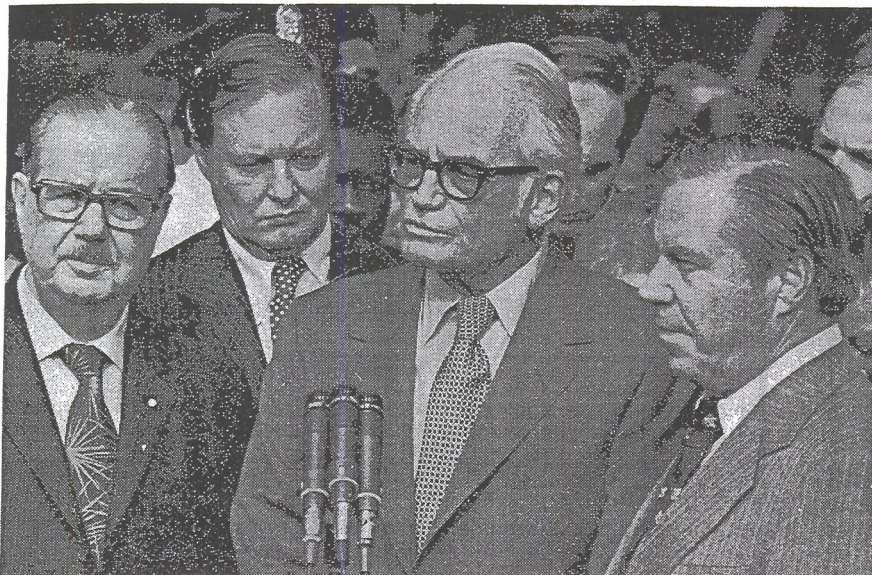
Newsweek

ence—and announced for impeachment in the cover-up case.

None of this seemed to register on the President, to the dismay of the men around him. He went out for an evening's cruise with his wife and daughters aboard the yacht Sequoia, and came back buoyed by them; next day, in a city awash with rumors that he was about to quit, he called his Cabinet scrambling together in urgent session and announced mildly that he wanted to talk about the No. 1 problem before America—inflation. He did digress for 25 rambly minutes on his own problems but only to get across the message that he had no intention whatever of standing down. To quit was a luxury for ordinary citizens, not for Presidents, one participant remembered him saying; the word "resignation" wasn't even mentioned in the Constitution, and he was therefore obliged to follow out the constitutional process to its end.

Washington had been braced for the President's resignation then and there; crowds began forming three and four deep outside the White House gates, the beginning of a death watch that lasted through the week, and members of Congress clustered around the wire-service tickers waiting for the news they felt sure would come. It didn't; instead, Ford went from the Cabinet meeting to a closed-door luncheon of the Senate Republican Policy Committee and reported the President's decision to hang on. The senators were stunned. "Is that *all* the President had to say?" asked Maryland's J. Glenn Beall, and Barry Goldwater was suddenly on his feet, flushed and shouting: "I'm not yelling at you, Mr. Vice President, but I'm just getting something off my chest—the President should resign!"

Ford gently excused himself, to a round of applause, and the luncheon dissolved into the first of what was to be a series of inconclusive meetings about how to get the sense of the Senate Republicans through the *cordon sanitaire* around the Oval Office. Goldwater volunteered at one of these sessions; a call was put through to Timmons, and the senator asked whether they might send one or more of their number to the President with their pained consensus—that his only choice was to resign. "Oh, not today," said Timmons. "The President is in no frame of mind to listen to anything like that."



Lawrence McIntosh

Scott, Goldwater, Rhodes: The gloom delegation

St. Clair: 'Human nature is human nature'



AP

Scott, Rhodes and Goldwater inside the southwest gate. Haig intercepted them on their way into the Oval Office; he told them frankly that the staff had concluded that resignation was Nixon's last best course but warned them against saying so flat-out—a course that might only spark his instinct for combat. "The President is up and down on this thing," said the general. "Please give him a straight story—if his situation is hopeless, say so. I just hope you won't confront him with your own demands."

They didn't. The President welcomed them in with handshakes and small talk all around; then he sat back, propped his feet on his desk, and, while his visitors sat tensely waiting for their opening, reminisced for some minutes about how kind President Eisenhower had been to him. Now, he noted, there are no living former Presidents left. "If I were to become an ex-President," he said, with a grim little parody of a smile, "I'd have no ex-Presidents to pal around with."

It was the first faint signal of his intentions, and when he threw the discussion open to his guests—"Well, what do you want to say?"—it was plain he realized what the answers would be.

"Mr. President," Goldwater began, "if it comes to a trial in the Senate, I don't think you can count on more than fifteen votes."

"And not more than ten in the House, John?" Nixon asked Rhodes.

"Maybe more, Mr. President," Rhodes answered, "but not much more."

"And I really campaigned for a lot of them," Nixon mused. "But that's all right—that's politics. Hugh, what's your assessment of the Senate?"

"I'd say twelve or fifteen, Mr. President," said Scott, and Goldwater cut in to amend his own desolate count—"I can only vouch for four or five who would stay with you right to the end."

Nixon turned once again to Scott for his summation.

"Gloomy," Scott answered.

The small, sour grin played once again on the President's lips. "I'd say *damned* gloomy," he amended.

The mission was achieved, the trigger set for firing. The President asked no advice, and the three Republicans offered none; he only assured them that his decision, when he took it, would be in the national interest. "These are sad times, Mr. President," Scott said in the melancholy dusk as they parted. "Don't you bother about that, Hugh," the President answered sadly. "Do your duty and God bless you."

His decision, as nearly as his people could reconstruct it,

was sealed in that hour; what he sought thereafter was only reinforcement. Henry Kissinger came to see him twice, once for 40 minutes after the Republican delegation left, again at 10 p.m. for a session that ran into the small hours of the morning. The Secretary's errand officially was a run-through of pressing international problems, notably the fighting on Cyprus and the smoldering tensions in the Middle East; he was dismayed, one source said, at how little Nixon seemed to know or care about them. What the President really wanted was counsel of quite another sort—what effect a prolonged Senate trial would have on foreign policy and his place in history. "Devastating," Kissinger answered without hesitation; he, too, gently counseled resignation—and Nixon, visibly distraught, confirmed that he had chosen that course.

Through the day he sought sustenance, talking to old supporters by telephone, gathering the family around him for what the gallows humorists in the corridors immediately dubbed "the last supper." A house photographer was called in improbably to record the event; the family posed together for him, arms linked and smiles frozen in defiant good cheer. But only the President seemed sheltered from the pain; the women all wept, and fell into his arms to be comforted.

Haig slipped away for a discreet rendezvous with Jaworski

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The day of the fall broke drizzly and pewter-gray over the Capital, and the White House fell to the dismal labor of preparing for the transfer of power. The President called in Ford to confirm his intention; then he repaired to his Executive Office Building hideaway with his yellow pads and began penciling Price's fifth and last speech draft into his own language. Kissinger called his own staff together, broke the news and put them to work drafting letters to governments abroad assuring them that U.S. foreign policy would not be affected by the crisis of the regime in Washington. And Haig slipped away from the White House unnoticed for a discreet rendezvous with Jaworski; the official word later was that the general simply advised the prosecutor of the President's decision, nothing more, but there were indications that he took some oblique soundings as to whether Jaworski meant to move against the President.

In the hours just before air-time that evening, Nixon called in two groups from the Hill—the first a formal deputation of



Comforting Julie: The long good-bys

its leaders, the second a reunion class of 46 of his oldest friends in the Congress. He held his calm through the first session, offering drinks if anybody wanted them; in the circumstances, nobody did. He rehearsed his speech briefly, then prayed their support for his successor: "Jerry Ford will make a good President—he'll heal the wounds of Watergate and give the country a chance to go forward again." Nobody interrupted his soliloquy; when it was finished, Mississippi's Sen. James Eastland snuffed out a well-chewed cigar and told him, "You've been a damn good President."

He left EOB 175 with his emotions still in tight control and walked across to the White House for the last nostalgic assembly with his cronies. But there his composure deserted him at the end of an emotional farewell. "I just hope you don't feel that I let you down," he told the gathering. His eyes welled over with tears; without another word, he rose and walked out through the choked stillness.

And then he was alone in the Oval Office with a single Secret Service agent, a camera crew and the most difficult speech of his quarter century in politics. The ironists of history noted that it was six years almost to the hour since he had accepted his party's nomination for President and had cried into the cavernous reaches of the Miami Coliseum that America was in trouble "because her leaders have failed." Confessing his own failure now did not come easily to him, nor did his place in history as the first man ever forced from the Presidency in disgrace. "I have never been a quitter," he said. "To leave office before my term is completed is opposed to every instinct in my body."

But leave it he did, and this time with none of the self-pity or recrimination that spoiled his "last press conference"

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in California a dozen years ago. If he was not contrite, neither did he rail against his enemies for having hounded him to bay; he regretted any "injuries" he had caused; he accepted that some of his judgments had been wrong and he had steeled himself to leave "with no bitterness toward those who have opposed me." He spent more than half his sixteen minutes celebrating his own genuine achievements, memorably in foreign affairs; he promised to continue to work toward the goal of world peace. But not any longer as President—he had been forced to conclude that he had lost the consent of the governed, and that he could now best serve "the interests of America" by stepping down.

The formal instrument of his departure was a spare, one-sentence letter addressed, by constitutional requirement, to Kissinger—"Dear Mr. Secretary: I hereby resign the Office of President of the United States. Sincerely, Richard M. Nixon." But he delayed its delivery till midday Friday and spent one last insomniac night in the White House telephoning old associates for solace; he woke one of them, New Hampshire's Sen. Norris Cotton, at 2 a.m. to say good-by.

The President's last morning was given to teary sentiment

In the end, he did not stay to witness Ford's accession to the most powerful job on earth. His last morning in the White House was given over to teary sentiment, first with a few intimate retainers in the family quarters, then the full assembled staff and Cabinet in the East Room. Nixon stood before them blurry-eyed with his family, his rigorous self-control dissolving into bathos. He fumbled at length over the virtues of government service, and said no one in his Administration had ever profited at the public expense—a charge to which he himself was vulnerable. He memorialized his father ("They would have called him sort of a little man . . . but he was a great man") and his mother ("She will have no books written about her, but she was a saint"). He spoke with thickening voice of his past and his future—"Only if you have been in the deepest valley can you ever know how magnificent it is to be on the highest mountain."

And then he was gone, walking down a red carpet on the south lawn to his helicopter Army One, taking the salutes of a 21-man cordon in the dress uniforms of four services. There were handshakes, embraces, kisses and epidemic tears; then finally, the President clambered aboard the copter, pausing at the head of the ramp and flinging both hands aloft in his familiar double V-for-victory. Julie, on the grass below, flashed a thumbs-up sign as her father disappeared inside. And in a moment, Army One lifted slowly from the lawn, banking to starboard over the austere gray marble of the Jefferson Memorial.

The Nixons, the Coxes and a last few trusted aides were airborne for California on Air Force One at the moment when the Presidency changed hands; Nixon landed at El Toro Marine Air Force Base a private citizen and disappeared quickly into the seclusion of his villa. A good deal of civic San Clemente met him there, and somebody pressed a spray of yellow roses into Pat's arms. But one doleful admirer said morosely: "People don't think he's a great man now."

Greatness in the end eluded Richard Nixon. It was left to history to judge whether his prodigies of peacemaking would finally outweigh the moral ruin of his Presidency. But his page in the record would forever be blotted by the crimes committed in his name and, as his own tape recordings now clearly show, at his direction. His Presidency ended in the narrow compass of seven days in August, but it died of what John Dean aptly called a cancer that grew and metastasized over two of the most dolorous years in the life of the American Republic. There were moments of high achievement for Richard Nixon in his 2,000 days; the real tragedy of his passing last week was that nothing so honored his Presidency as his leaving of it.