

THE MEDIA



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TV crew watches resignation outside White House: Excitement, bewilderment and, finally, a certain numbness

The White House Deathwatch

It was a journalistic suspense story that had been unwinding for more than two years. But when the denouement finally came—in just four, electrifying days—it stunned the most shockproof political-press veterans, even those who had long been predicting the last chapter. Ironically, last week had promised to be the media's breath-catching lull before the full Congress grappled with the President's impeachment; even CBS's Walter Cronkite, who had vowed to stick to his post until Watergate finally ran its course, had slipped off to Martha's Vineyard for a few recuperative days of sailing. But it turned out to be a week that swept the U.S. press corps through a maelstrom of emotions—excitement, bewilderment, frustration and, for some, the exhilaration of vindication tempered by simple human compassion. By the weekend, the press was feeling the sort of psychic numbness that, as one Washington newsman put it, "follows the long wait at the bedside of a dying patient."

The four-day drama opened with a stampede. On Monday afternoon, about 80 reporters were on hand in the White House press room when two Administration secretaries started handing out Nixon's fatal statement on the June 23rd transcript that he was about to release. The secretaries were all but trampled as newsmen rushed up to grapple for copies of the two-page document before dashing for phones. For the next three days, deputy press secretary Gerald Warren either doggedly denied—or simply dodged—every question involving the President's imminent resignation. The press room was so supercharged with

expectation that the Associated Press chattered out a classic piece of semantic muddle: "By afternoon the speculation [had] hardened into rumor."

The fever crested on Wednesday when two afternoon papers—The Providence (R.I.) Bulletin and The Phoenix (Ariz.) Gazette—carried stories saying that the President had decided to step down. Although Bulletin editors refused to identify their "reliable source close to the President," speculation centered on Rabbi Baruch Korff, the zealous Nixon defender from Providence who had visited with Nixon earlier in the week. Officials at the Gazette revealed that the paper's chief Washington correspondent had been tipped off by aides to Arizona Congressman John J. Rhodes, the House Republican leader. Both scoops, as it turned out, were a trifle premature: Nixon did not finally make up his mind until late Wednesday afternoon.

Rotten: It was ABC-TV that committed the week's only major gaffe. On Wednesday, ABC's Capitol Hill correspondent Bob Clark phoned the network's Washington bureau to report that a Senate source said that President Nixon had "indicated" to Sen. Barry Goldwater he would bow out. "Incredibly," recalled Clark, "I learned a half hour later that ABC was reporting Barry Goldwater told me the President would resign." To make matters worse, Clark's Senate source later corrected himself; Goldwater, he now said, was not involved in the leak in any way. But by the time Clark came on the air to apologize to the senator, Goldwater had already taken to the Senate floor to denounce

TV's "damned lies." Glaring up at the press gallery, Goldwater snapped: "You're a rotten bunch."

On Wednesday night NBC packed up its entire "Today" show operation and moved it from Rockefeller Center to Washington. CBS's Cronkite and Eric Sevareid, who had also been plucked back from vacation, flew to the Capital for the network's coverage. The next morning's newspaper headlines ran the gamut from caution to virtual certainty. NIXON DRAFTS RESIGNATION screamed The New York Daily News ("It was a scoop from a good source," said a News executive). The Washington Post didn't go quite that far (NIXON RESIGNATION SEEMED NEAR), while The New York Times simply equivocated (NIXON REPORTED UNDECIDED ON RESIGNING).

Class: The second largest TV audience in U.S. history—an estimated 110 million people (the first moon landing was tops with 125 million)—tuned in the President's farewell to the nation. All three networks manfully struggled to fill their two hours of warm-up coverage by interviewing Congressional leaders, legal scholars and Joes-in-the-street from Peoria to Times Square. Most newsmen displayed a somber magnanimity toward the speech itself. NBC's John Chancellor called it "restrained and statesmanlike." CBS's Dan Rather, regarded as one of Nixon's toughest inquisitors, said that "he gave his moment a touch of class ... more than that, a touch of majesty"—an observation that brought a sharp demurral from his colleague Roger Mudd: "From the viewpoint of Congress, that wasn't a very satisfactory speech."

Rather was first to alert viewers that the next President had tapped Detroit newsman Jerry terHorst as his new press secretary and to report on the evening's

most bizarre event—someone's decision to lock reporters in the White House press room for 23 minutes to insure Nixon's privacy while he walked from the Executive Office Building to the White House. Warren later apologized for the incarceration.

On Friday, most of the major newspapers published special "background" stories that had been prepared well in advance. The Washington Post ran a 24-page special section entitled "The Nixon Years," a graphic portrayal of the President's career that took three months to compile and will appear as part of an instant book called "The Fall of the President" which goes on sale this week.

Titles: The sudden resignation presented the print media with all manner of arcane problems, technical and stylistic. The Washington Post found that it hadn't any type large enough to produce a giant NIXON RESIGNS headline—so it set the letters in smaller type, took a picture of them and then blew them up to 2 inches through its photoengraving process. At The St. Louis Post-Dispatch, editors fretted over what titles to bestow on the drama's two lead characters. Between Friday's first and third editions, "Gerald R. Ford" had been elevated to "Mr. Ford," and "Mr. Nixon" had slipped to simply "Nixon."

Back in Washington, the fractious relationship between the media and the Nixon Administration concluded on a somewhat schizoid note. Press secretary Ronald Ziegler bade adieu to his journalistic combatants with a gracious, if tight-lipped, accolade to "the diversity and strength of . . . our free press." But a few hours earlier, White House staffer Mort Allin, who prepared the President's news summaries each morning, stormed into the briefing room and snarled at startled reporters: "I hope you guys are having fun getting drunk in your celebration, you [expletives deleted]."

Cool: For their part, White House press regulars seemed to be looking forward to covering President Ford (box). The new press secretary, Jerry terHorst, is a cool, widely respected veteran—he has covered the last four Presidential campaigns for The Detroit News—who reportedly has received a firm commitment from Ford to be plugged into the decision-making machinery. "He'll come on like Jim Hagerty did during the Eisenhower years," predicts one admiring colleague.

As it happens, virtually all of the newsmen who tagged along with Ford during his Vice Presidency will now yield their suddenly hot property to the media's White House stars. And journalists will begin the psychologically wrenching transition from the numbing paroxysm of the week's events to a fresh era of Presidential press relations. As an emotionally drained John Chancellor observed after Nixon's historic speech: "A President has resigned his office. Tomorrow, we will have a new President. And the world goes on."

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