

# PAT NIXON: STEEL AND SORROW

She was followed and photographed everywhere, from the top of the Great Wall of China to the high plains of Peru, but in many ways Pat Nixon as First Lady was even more of an enigma than her husband. She was a profoundly private woman whose true feelings were known only to herself. To the world, she was the perfect presidential wife, tireless, modestly chic, coolly regal. To her family, she was the ultimate support, so accustomed to smiling through adversity that it became routine. When she was a girl, she once said, "life was sort of sad, so I tried to cheer everybody up. I learned to be that kind of person."

When Nixon was considering resigning from the Republican ticket in 1952 over a campaign-funding scandal, Pat helped persuade him to stay on. "If you do not fight back but simply crawl away, you will destroy yourself," he later quoted her as having told him. Three minutes before he went on the air with his famous Checkers speech, he faltered again, telling her that he did not think he could do it. "Of course you can," she replied. "Pat is not a quitter," he told a nationwide TV audience minutes later. "After all, her name was Patricia Ryan and she was born on St. Patrick's Day—and you know the Irish never quit."

Much of her life was indeed a hard, often grim schooling in simply overcoming. She was born in Ely, Nev., in 1912, and was moved to California before she was two. By the time she reached adolescence, she was nursing her mother, who was dying of cancer, and doing chores on the family's ten-acre truck farm in Artesia, about 16 miles southeast of Los Angeles. Shortly after her mother died, she was nurse again to her father, who had contracted silicosis as a copper miner. On her own at 17, just as the Depression was beginning, she took on a series of jobs—everything from telephone-switchboard operator to \$7-a-day movie extra—to put herself through the University of Southern California.

Pat was working in Whittier, Calif., when she met Nixon, who sought a role in an amateur play just to meet the pretty new teacher. He proposed the first night he saw her, but she kept him waiting for two years before finally consenting, at the age of 28, to become Mrs. Richard Nixon. Once the vows were taken, she totally subordinated herself to his life and his ambitions, serving as wife, mother and uncomplaining companion on political platforms round the globe. "The only thing I could do was help him," she later said, "but it was not a life I would have chosen."

Away from her husband, she could be warm and outgoing. But many people saw her as Plastic Woman, with a smiling mask and a bland word for ev-



THE YOUNG CONGRESSMAN &amp; HIS WIFE WITH 13-MONTH-OLD TRICIA (1947)



U.S.C. GRADUATION PICTURE (1937)

she replied simply but eloquently: "My privacy." What did she miss most? She repeated: "My privacy."

If the years made Pat stronger than most people—she is, in fact, more steel than plastic—they also left her, like her husband, with a deep resentment of those who escaped the same harsh struggles. "I never had time to dream about being anyone else," she once told a woman reporter in a rare unguarded moment. "I had to work. I haven't just sat back and thought of myself or my ideas or what I wanted to do. I've kept working. I don't have time to worry about who I admire or who I identify with. I've never had it easy. I'm not like all you . . . all those people who had it easy."

Throughout the ordeal of Watergate, Pat was the firm standard around whom the rest of the family rallied. "I don't know how she does it," said one member of her staff. "There are times when it must be unbearable. But she does not let down. She is the most self-disciplined woman I have ever seen." Said her son-in-law, David Eisenhower: "Mrs. Nixon is always there with a shoulder to lean on. But whose shoulder does she have to lean on?" It is a perhaps unanswerable question. The only reply may well be: no one's.

Looking from the outside, no one can say what any marriage is really like, but even during their private hours the Nixons were often apart. No one could overlook the many weekends he went off to Camp David or to the Bahamian island of Robert Abplanalp with Charles G. ("Bebe") Rebozo, leaving Pat alone. Her own staff bristled at the way he ignored her in public appearances, and there were few of the usual affectionate gestures between husband and wife.

Whenever she was asked if she was happy, Pat usually said something like "Yes, I am. I've got the greatest guy in the world." Once, when a reporter suggested that she had had a good life, Pat raised her eyebrows and retorted: "I just don't tell all." Those five words may tell everything.



STIFLING SOBS AFTER 1960 DEFEAT

"It was not a life I would have chosen."

ery occasion. Asked if she was ever bored by the same tedious campaign rally day after day, she would answer: "I'm always interested in the rallies, they're so different. Some are outside; some are inside. Some have old people; some have young people." All places she visited were fine and interesting, none ever finer or more interesting than another. She deflected questions with a wave of the hand and the words "You'll have to ask Dick about that."

Unlike Jacqueline Kennedy, who redecored the White House, or Lady Bird Johnson, who promoted a national beautification program, Pat never deliberately carved out any special province as First Lady (though she added as many antiques to the White House

as Jackie did). She was nonetheless a highly useful political helpmeet to her husband. Her attractive Middle American image, well-groomed but never so conspicuously fashionable to cause envy, could scarcely have been better for a conservative President. She had a talent for small talk and mixing with people that always eluded Nixon. He quickly discovered as well that she was an ideal ambassador, and she has probably traveled more miles abroad than any other First Lady. Through some legerdemain, she always managed on those trips, no matter how long and tiring the day, to look perfectly turned out and to be gracious to all.

On occasion there was a hint that there might be another Pat Nixon. Appearing on television when her husband conceded to John Kennedy in 1960, she struggled to stifle deep sobs. Her friends saw her cry during that period for the first and last time. Having seen her husband defeated in 1960 and again, in a bid for the governorship of California, in 1962, she made it quietly clear six years later that she did not want him to run for President. But she did not oppose his running for a second term.

As it had been for so many of her predecessors, the role of First Lady was far more of a burden for her than a glory. When asked what she had given up when she moved into the White House,