

Instant History, Off Camera

Reviewed by
Eric Redman

The reviewer is the author of "The Dance of Legislation."

Like other primordial clashes of Good with Evil, Watergate spawned symbolic heroes and villains in profusion. But of the heroes (or villains), only Dan Rather ever confronted Richard Nixon face to face in full view of millions of Americans.

To some, he became a single-minded Lincoln Steffens of the tube; to others, a personification of the destructive media power that drove the President from office. Perhaps he was just an angry little bull terrier, not capable of crippling but determined to bite with his sharp CBS teeth.

At any rate, he did a good job of it. All through the long months when it seemed Nixon might really escape, Rather offered hope, and for that reason alone we should forgive him the lachrymose "instant analysis" he provided on the night Nixon quit.

But should we buy his book? That's a more difficult question. In the aftermath of Watergate, heroes and villains alike are trying to cash in as authors; a healthy skepticism will soon be the only consumer protection available against disappointed expectations and bookstore-induced insolvency.

"The Palace Guard" is likely to trigger just such skepticism, at least for those who never bought a Sam Ervin T-shirt. The publishers have taken care to emblazon Rather's name across the cover, adding in somewhat smaller type the name of Rather's co-author, CBS colleague Gary Paul Gates. And for reviewers, there's a special irritant: a two-page publicity blurb—accompanying a Dan Rather book rushed into print before Watergate fever subsides—that waits until its final sentence to note, "This is not a book about Watergate . . ."

So what is "The Palace Guard," if not a book about Watergate? It's really an instant history of the Nixon administration, and useful in reminding us that the administration acquired its

Book World

THE PALACE GUARD. By Dan Rather and Gary Paul Gates.

(Harper & Rowe. 326 pp. \$8.95)

sinister character over time, in response to certain definable events and personalities. The theme throughout is How Haldeman Became Boss, and the explanation, essentially is that he found an opening for himself and Ehrlichman when Arthur Burns and Daniel Patrick Moynihan fell indecorously on their respective swords of long-windedness and flamboyance.

By then, Chappaquiddick—*deus ex machina*—had removed from the White House "the restraint provided by the daily thought that Nixon might have to face Kennedy for re-election." The administration felt safe in veering toward the right, and in stretching the law to wiretap incessantly, block the Kent State investigation, and hamper school desegregation in the South.

Rather and Gates conclude that "the brazen felonies that brought the Nixon administration to its knees grew out of a fundamental disregard for the law that took root in the first two years." All it required was the humiliation of the 1970 elections—plus a barrage of polls showing Muskie ahead of Nixon—to make Haldeman and his followers decide that "drastic measures would be needed to assure their man of a second term as President. And drastic measures are what they took."

This is the story the authors tell, albeit in the digressive manner of a self-important dinner guest who's confident of not being interrupted. On the strictly technical level, "The Palace Guard" is a frustrating work, filled with all the literary abbreviations we accept on the evening news but normally reject in print. The pages are studded with clichés (Hickel, Romney, Stans and Volpe graduated "from the school of hard knocks"), idiot-card ellipses instead of punctuation ("to invade Cambodia . . . to side with Pakistan in the Bangladesh war . . . to modify U.S. position at the SALT talks), and shorthand conclusions

that here sound like nonsense (Ehrlichman "was against intergrated housing in the suburbs, but he had no alternative remedy of his own for dealing with the plight of the cities").

Despite its uneven literary style, "The Palace Guard" does accurately reconstruct the major incidents of Richard Nixon's pre-Watergate presidency. Yet it is one thing to recount events, another to elucidate them. Rather and Gates offer an explanation that centers on Haldeman: he did become the boss, he valued nothing above Richard Nixon's political fortunes, and he staffed the White House with feckless aides of unquestioning obedience. But isn't Nixon himself still the key? If indeed he surrendered the reins, what qualities or quirks of mind made him do it?

That Nixon manages to wriggle through "The Palace Guard" unidentified and unexplained is not, in itself, surprising. After all, he eluded Archibald Cox, the United States Senate, and now—thanks to his successor—he will probably elude the special prosecutor, the grand jury, and the courts as well. But here he has eluded Dan Rather—and that's a pity. What's worse, he has evidently persuaded Rather and Gates that he need not be explained at all. Like T.E. Lawrence ("of Arabia"), whose most passionate desire was to baffle anyone who tried to understand him, Richard Nixon can still claim a peculiar victory.

As for Dan Rather, he has left the White House beat for bigger (and, says CBS, better) things. Gone are the days when the mere sound of his name on Mr. Nixon's lips, at a televised press conference, could make us tingle with anticipation; he was Hank Aaron in the biggest league of all, and we yearned for that Final Home Run. He never hit it, and now we will probably search the bookstalls for some substitute until all our Watergate symbols begin to fuzz.