

Intimate Portraits of Pre-Watergate Years

BEFORE THE FALL: An Inside View of the Pre-Watergate White House. By William Safire. Doubleday. 704 pp.; \$12.50.

Reviewed by
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IN HIS lexicon of politics published seven years ago William Safire, a senior speechwriter for President Nixon until March 1973, recalled how Nixon introduced him to the 1968 campaign team: "Watch out what you say — he's a writer." Safire has proved that to the hilt — in the speeches he drafted and the one-liners he wrote for Nixon and now again in his book. It is the most intimate picture we have yet had of Nixon the man and the President, the how and why of his methods, and the people with whom he surrounded himself. We have already had a spate of Nixon and/or Watergate books, and there will be more, but this one is different. It was written by a Nixon man untouched by Watergate, who left the White House before the roof fell in.

Safire shows himself to be a deft phrase-maker and an astute and flexible politico — flexible enough to have a fall-back position rather than go down with the ship. He first met Nixon in Moscow in 1959 at the famous "kitchen debate" with Khrushchev — a debate which raised Nixon's standing with American voters and Safire's standing with Nixon.

It is precisely because Safire's relationship with Nixon remained relatively friendly to the end that his book will be read. He knew Nixon better than any of those who have so far published books about him. "He is a man worthy of respect," says Safire, "and yet he is a man worthy of anger too ... a leader magnificent in defeat, vindictive in victory." Safire reminds us that as President Nixon ended the Vietnam war (but not until he had

'He left the White House before the roof fell in'

spent his whole first term fighting it). As a partisan "he had a heart too soon made cold, a head too soon made hot." As a person Nixon was "an idealistic conniver evoking the strenuous life while he thinks too much." In fairness to Safire it should be said that his detailed examples of Nixonian behavior throw a far more revealing light on him than the above comments would indicate.

NO ONE understands better than Safire the need for absolute candor backed by evidence, written if possible. This is what the book supplies in large measure, right down to slews of White House memos to and from the President, Haldeman and others. It seems clear that Safire always intended to write a book about his White House experience, but how different a book it has proved to be. The memos, outlines, recommendations, illustrations, initialed comments by RN and others are all included, much of it relevant, some not.

He passes forthright judgments on White House figures. He comes down hard on Haldeman, yet defends the ineffable Ronald Ziegler,

despite "an unfortunate inclination to use the language of a computer." He cites ex-Treasury Secretary George Shultz as "proof that a system does not corrupt an incorruptible man." Safire's feelings on Kissinger appear equivocal, willing to wound yet seemingly afraid to strike. Of Haldeman he says flatly that "he could be cruel in person as Nixon could be cruel in the abstract." The book abounds in such judgments, revelations, memoranda, obiter dicta, even a few humorous anecdotes.

All very well, you say, but what about Nixon and the tapes? Safire doesn't duck the issue. "The tapes show Nixon's dark side," he admits. "Nobody can read most of them without a sinking, disgusted feeling." In Safire's view Haldeman rendered "the greatest single disservice any Presidential aide ever performed for his chief: installing a voice-actuated, indiscriminate recording system." For the first time we learn from Safire that Nixon in 1972 suggested to Haldeman that it would be a good idea to start "cleaning up" the tapes, but that "Haldeman had said no, there was plenty of time." Thus, adds Safire, "the keeper of the flame made it possible to pull down the temple."



WILLIAM SAFIRE