

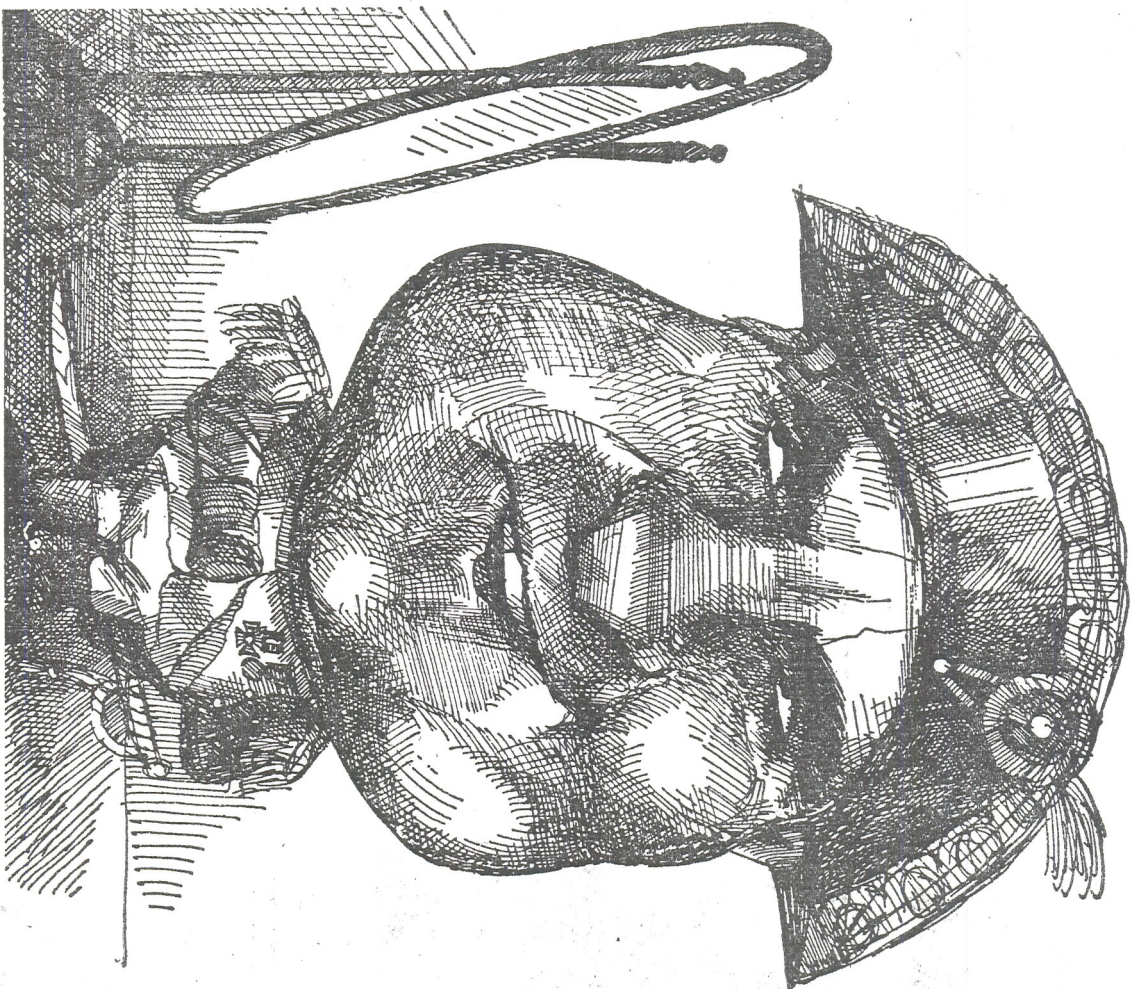
One of the President's Men

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

By ANTHONY MARRO

WILLIAM SAFIRE seems to be one of those people who habitually—perhaps compulsively—stash away anecdotes, bon mots, and other people's quotes, much as squirrels stash away nuts for the winter. In the years that he worked as a speechwriter in the Nixon White House, he used the bottom left-hand drawer of his desk as a repository for tidbits of this sort, occasionally telling reporters that

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"A Public Office is a Public Trust," an illustration by Edward Sorel

he was saving them for his planned insider book on the Nixon presidency, which he intended to call *A Hurry to Be Great*.

Safire has emptied out his desk drawer and—from the looks of it—several file cabinets as well, and the result is a hefty (704 pages) anecdotal history of Nixon's first term that is lively, sometimes entertaining, and ultimately defensive of his former boss, whom he repeatedly praises for his courage, refers to as "R.N.," and compares (usually favorably) to both of the Roosevelts and to Winston Churchill. Watergate forced Safire to change his title to *Before The Fall*, and required him to make some observations about the darker side of the Nixon character that one gathers he would just as soon have ignored. ("No sweat," as he quotes Haldeman as saying, "Adds to the credibility.") But the purpose of the book clearly is not to rehash Watergate and the disgrace of a President; among other things, he says, it is "an effort not to lose sight of all that went right in examining what went wrong."

A recurrent theme of *Before The Fall* seems to be that the final verdict on Nixon is not yet in, and that the present one might someday be reversed on appeal. "Should a baseball slugger who is thrown out at home be denied credit for hitting a triple?" he asks. "Will a 'distant replay' show him to have been safe at home after all?" This comes early on in the book, and serves as fair warning that there will be little comfort here for those who insist that Safire's slugger had never hit more than a broken-bat single to begin with.

In its style, this is a magpie sort of book, cluttered with first drafts of speeches,

presidential scribbles, press clips, memos, anecdotes and doodles, along with a collection of puns that would cause even a Grossinger's comic to wince. (Leonard Garment on a bureaucrat named Lapin who was refusing to be quietly eased out of his government job: "Lapins make lousy leavers.")

Parts of the book read like a press release ("Nixon stumped the country, blazing away at Lyndon Johnson on the inflation front . . ."), and Safire has a weakness for overly-dramatic chapter endings, many of which seem to have been written

"The President liked to refer to himself in the third person and kept a music box on his desk that played 'Hail To The Chief.' "

for tympani accompaniment. ("Then he strode quickly out of the room and the breakfast was over.") There also is the problem of the Safire humor, which—like dandelion wine—is pleasant enough if you've acquired a taste for it but bothersome if you haven't.

Safire says that one of his self-appointed roles was to loosen up the "reverential atmosphere" around Nixon—no mean feat considering that the President liked to refer to himself in the third person and

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kept a music box on his desk that played "Hail To The Chief." Just how well he succeeded isn't clear, but one of the annoying things about Safire's book is the lengths to which he goes to work in some of his own punch lines that might better have been lost to posterity. An anecdote about Kissinger's alleged tendency to look back and agonize over decisions after they had been made, and about Nixon's admonition to him to remember Lot's wife, ends with Safire's observation that later in Moscow "Kissinger did indeed turn into a pillar of SALT." A long passage about diplomatic jargon seems no more than an excuse for Safire to tell us how he once had cautioned Ron Ziegler that "when a participant in a meeting threw a tomato at another head of state, that was a 'fruitful exchange.'"

By the time Safire tells how he responded to a query about whether the Mayor of Limerick, Ireland, and his wife should be given an appointment with Nixon ("*When the Mayor of Limerick arrives/We could take him to all the dives/But the Mayor and spouse/Should see the White House/Which they'll remember all of their lives*") it becomes easier to understand why his original publishers, William Morrow & Co., decided that they didn't want the book after all, and asked for their advance money back.

For all this, *Before The Fall* is a serious book, or, at least a book that will have to be taken seriously. It will be hard to write about Nixon in the future without consulting Safire's sympathetic but telling account of the "us against them" mentality of the Nixon White House, which saw preventive retaliation as not just a through-the-looking-glass rationalization for air strikes in Asia, but also as a basic rule for domestic political power: "do it unto others before they do it unto you." Ditto, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, who is depicted as "a fierce reinforcer of Nixon's penchant for secrecy . . ." as a man whose tolerance for wiretapping (Safire was among the victims) "watered the roots of Watergate," and as tantrum-prone, two-faced and insecure. And Safire's descriptions of the day to day running of the White House and the mechanics of presidential speechwriting will assure the book of a place in the bibliogra-

phies of studies of the Nixon presidency yet to come.

The problem with *Before The Fall*, however, is that its anecdotes are so good and its analysis so unquestioning that it may in the long run become better known for its trivia than for its substance. Safire the storyteller is entertaining enough, but Safire the historian has trouble divorcing himself from Safire the presidential speechwriter and flack. He shows no qualms about describing Nixon's trip to Peking as "ripping off a national blindfold with daring and panache"—and barely pauses to acknowledge that it was Nixon and his fellow Cold Warriors who had helped keep the blindfold in place for three decades. He writes matter-of-factly that career bureaucrats in IRS "with George Shultz's backing, prevented zealots like John Dean from turning government power into a political weapon"—and sidesteps the evidence that Nixon

" 'Do it unto others before they do it unto you.' "

was at least as anxious as Dean to use the IRS against his political enemies, and in fact (according to Dean) once criticized Shultz as a "candy-ass" for not going along.

This carries over to his defense of Nixon, a "yes, but ..." sort of defense that includes an "everybody else did it" rationale and so permeates *Before The Fall* that the book might well have been subtitled *What About Chappaquiddick?*, or *Daniel Schorr Had It Coming*. The Safire technique is to begin by saying it is wrong to tap the telephones of reporters, and to end by saying it is wrong to tap the telephones of reporters, and in between to make the strongest possible case to rationalize Nixon's wrong-headed decision to tap the telephones of reporters.

"No President," he writes, "could have had more noble motives than to end the arms race that imperiled the human race; to end the war that had bled and dispirited the United States in the past decade; and to begin the intricate, triangular diplomacy that would create a balance of

power and perhaps a stable world order for the next generation.

"With reasons and motives like those ... Nixon indulged himself in despising reporters who—unwittingly or not—undercut his efforts for peace just to get a hot story, or officials who betrayed the nation's trust just to curry favor with some reporter."

It is a virtuoso performance, managing to balance the fate of the world against the mindless ego-tripping of reporters and the near-treason of disloyal officials. But one has to pause somewhere in here to wonder just how long it would take a parade of all the reporters who seriously "undercut his efforts for peace just to get a hot story" to march past Nixon's shuffleboard court at Key Biscayne, or how big a room it would take to handle a convention of all the officials who "betrayed the nation's trust just to curry favor with some reporter."

Safire, now a columnist for *The New York Times*, reverts most completely to his PR past when he indulges in exercises that seem designed only to fuzz issues and shrug off obvious wrongs. He tells us that the government had spent millions on facilities near the Kennedy and Johnson homes, and in the next sentence equates it with money spent in Nixon's homes, adding as an afterthought: "What the hell, Haldeman figured, Nixon planned to leave San Clemente to the public in his will." He complains that "some newsmen who had cried out for a 'shield' to give them a privilege against testifying to a grand jury were among the first to denounce Presidential claims to confidentiality or privilege on the Watergate tapes demanded by grand juries"—an interesting argument that overlooks the fact that Nixon in this case was being investigated for allegedly having obstructed justice, while the reporters clamoring for a "shield law" were not (in most cases, at least) trying to protect themselves from indictment.

The purpose of the excuses, the lame rationalizations, the straight out puffery and the attempts to shift the blame onto the likes of John Dean, of course, is to clear the way for one of Safire's larger themes: that the Nixon we have come to know from the White House tapes is not the true Nixon. The "dark side" of Nixon that emerges from the tapes is simply Nixon at his weakest, he insists, and not the Nixon who "sped the pace of desegregation," brought us "peace with honor," and who even at the end courageously left office without a guarantee of a pardon, having "set aside the kind of plea bargaining Spiro Agnew had engaged in as unworthy of a President."

Safire's Nixon is not without flaws, of course; it's too late for that. Safire allows that Nixon at times could be small-minded, vindictive and mean, and that despite his constant references to Teddy Roosevelt's "man in the arena" who failed daring greatly, Nixon failed "not while daring greatly, but while lying meanly." But his unconvincing conclusion is not just that the record on Nixon is still open, but that to judge him by his tapes is as misleading as to judge Achilles by his heel.

In the end the book gives us good (if somewhat perverse) reason to be thankful that Nixon installed the taping system in the White House: if nothing else, it gave the country a truly inside view of the Nixon presidency that even a publicist as skillful as Safire could not offset. □