

The 'Bananas Thing'

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By William Safire

DALLAS—Was Richard Nixon mentally unstable at any time of his Presidency? Did he flip his lid, go bananas, fall off his rocker, become unhinged, demented, looney, or a candidate for a funny farm?

John Osborne, a veteran Nixon-watcher, asserted recently in New York magazine that the former President had been "sick of mind," which—if words have meaning—means that the reporter thinks he was mentally ill.

Theodore H. White, in the forthcoming "Breach of Faith: The Fall of Richard Nixon," writes that the handling of the President in his final days was "the management of an unstable personality" by a staff chief who feared a "personality explosion." Historian White—most of whose judgments of people are right on the mark—sorrowfully predicts that the Nixon story will be written by some future students as "a study in psychiatric imbalance."

Messrs. Woodward and Bernstein have not yet been heard from, but they have been asking, "Is it true he was talking to the portraits on the wall of the family quarters?" The answers have not been wholly satisfactory—there are only landscapes, and no portraits, on the walls upstairs, and not even a crackpot talks to landscapes—but we can expect their Nixon to be virtually swinging from the chandeliers.

Some residents of San Clemente, in bitter amusement, refer to this long-distance amateur psychoanalysis as "the bananas thing." Sensibly, Mr. Nixon says nothing at all: He is not about to follow "I am not a crook" with "I was not a nut."

Why this sudden spaté of speculation? First, there is need to come up with a fresh angle, some wrinkle that has gone undetected by analysts on daily deadlines. This pressure affects the most distinguished journalists, who are partly motivated (to use a psychological term) by the urge to come up with a new lead.

Next, logicians abhor a logical vacuum. There is a delicious inconsistency in the Nixon story: How could an intelligent man, a canny politician, blunder so egregiously in covering up a foolish crime—unless he had indeed lost his marbles? The historian who figures this out might earn a niche in history himself.

Spurred by both this need for a lead and itch for a niche, chronicler-analysts turn to the sources closest to the scene. Only two men dealt directly with Mr. Nixon during his final week in office; one, Ronald Ziegler, has con-

tributed nothing to the "bananas thing." The other, not surprisingly, emerges as the national hero in most accounts, the man who gets the ho-sannas for his easing-out of an "unstable" President before he could explode in madness: loyal, "leak-proof" Al Haig.

Now that we have pinpointed the reasons for—and the source who profits from—the "bananas thing," to the main point: Was Nixon nuts?

Yes, I will have no bananas. From my own observation—admittedly fragmentary, but at least first-hand and buttressed by talks with intimates—I saw Richard Nixon in his final stages as a man harassed, tortured and torn, but of sound mind coming to a rational decision to resign.

Those who buy Haig's bananas are making medical judgments based on second-hand accounts which pass along unattributed charges made by men who are not in the least qualified to make such judgments.

A decade ago, when a bunch of alienated alienists were persuaded to declare Senator Goldwater crazy from

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afar, he won a libel suit—but at least his detractors could claim some expertise. Not so today's bananas-theorists.

Secretary Kissinger, who has always been General Haig's closest collaborator, tells Mr. White in direct quotation that Mr. Nixon had been "on the verge of a nervous breakdown" in May, 1970. Since practicing psychiatry without a license has become today's indoor sport, let me suggest that Dr. Kissinger was projecting his own anxieties onto a father-figure.

The truth, I think, has a Catch-22 quality. A parody of Kipling's "If" goes: "If you can keep your head while all about you are losing theirs—then maybe you don't understand the seriousness of the situation."

In the same way, if Mr. Nixon had been serene, calm and unperturbed during the last white-hot week, then he would have been bananas. Instead, he was distraught and upset, as normal minds are under such abnormal circumstances. He cried at his final farewells, which is what sane and strong men do under real strain: Nixon's political crash had nothing to do with a mental crack-up.

At Yale last week, a professor of colonial history presented evidence to show that King George III—long maligned as a mad monarch—was not only not crazy but "was not such a bad guy." It has taken revisionist historians 200 years to give crazy George a clean bill of mental health, and only 200 days to besmear the mental stability of Richard Nixon.