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Nixon on His Knees

By William Safire

WASHINGTON—Nixon-hatred, that most profitable of media exploitations, reaches a crescendo this week with (1) the glorification on film of reporters-turned-mindreaders Woodward and Bernstein, and (2) the publication of their latest journalism, which purports to be an account of the fallen President's last days in the White House.

What motivates such outpourings of vitrol? "We had to make a lot of it up, but there's two million bucks in it," said one of the writers. (Actually, I doubt whether either of them said that, but somebody once told me that he overheard somebody else say that Woodstein said something remotely like that at a party, which—by the new Post-Newsweek reportorial standards—means it can be turned into direct quotation and be accepted as true.

More important, why is there such a ready market for even the most specious guesswork that Richard Nixon was a drunken, carpet-pounding maniac toward the end of his term?

The answer is the need of many people to cover up their guilt feelings. Now that the nation has learned that the power-abuses of the Kennedy-Johnson era were greater both in scope and intensity than even the worst excesses of the Nixon years—and now that there is evidence that the Democratic National Committee knew of plans for the Watergate break-in six weeks in advance—there is a requirement for a heavy dose of reassurance that it was right to strike Nixon down. To anesthetize their consciences they have to keep telling each other that he was Evil Incarnate. They have to insist he was dangerously demented.

Consider the moment that the Post-Newsweek set believes proves beyond doubt that President Nixon had gone bananas. In the small Lincoln sitting room, alone with Henry Kissinger, the embattled President is reported to have said: "Henry, you are not a very orthodox Jew, and I am not an orthodox Quaker, but we need to pray." And then, according to this report, "Nixon got down on his knees. Kissinger felt he had no alternative but to kneel down, too."

How square. How cloyingly pious. How insufferably un-Georgetown. Can you imagine any person in his right mind, the target of more intense and extended abuse than any American in this century, turning to prayer?

And worst of all—to actually fall to one's knees? That's a bit thick, isn't it? You won't find Katherine Graham, or J.F.K.'s Ben Bradlee, or Woodward and Bernstein, getting down on their knees to pray—they're not religious fanatics. To get down on your knees when your world is coming apart

must be a mark of mental instability.

Perhaps that incident never happened, but was one of those dramatic moments put in to hypo sales: in that case, Henry Kissinger is the innocent victim of false attribution. Perhaps Larry Eagleburger, the Kissinger aide who is made to appear the main source, is telling the truth when he insists he was present the only time his boss talked to Woodward and Bernstein, and neither he nor his boss ever said one word to them about that.

And yet I hope that the Nixon-on-his-knees episode—reported third-hand, and distorted to fit the authors' bestselling thesis—has some basis in truth. Even the ending: "Kissinger thought he had finished. But the President did not rise. He was weeping..."

Pretty nutty, huh? Obviously the man in tears was bonkers: Strong men who weep are 'round the bend, and in no mental shape to be in positions of power. What we need in the Oval Office are men of real plastic, with

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ice water in their veins, who will never shed a tear under any circumstances—cool men, preferably agnostic, who would never embarrass associates by leaving them "no alternative" but to pray.

Post-Newsweek writers and editors have every right to revile a show of reverence and claim it as proof that Richard Nixon was nuts. If they were to present it—as Irving Stone does—as "fictionalized biography" that would be honest. But what is proper for a dramatist is a rip-off for a journalist.

Who is really sick in this situation? Is it the writers squeezing their last few million dollars out of Watergate, who make a mockery of historical reporting by putting quotation marks around remarks that their secondary sources never heard spoken?

Is it the reader or viewer, uncomfortable with the mounting evidence that a moral double standard kissed one Presidency and killed another, who desperately seeks a fix in film and print to get those hatred-juices flowing?

Or was it the imperfect man who was President, trusting in the decency and discretion of his closest adviser, who fell to his knees and humbled himself before God—and, tears in his eyes, cried out for some answer to why he could not be allowed to fulfill his dream of being the world's peacemaker?

In judging that man at that moment as worthy only of jeers and snickers, the profiteers of Watergate—and all those addicts who crave a loving spoonful of fresh hatred—judge themselves.