



The Way He Was

On Aug. 6, 1974, the 781st day of the 784-day Watergate debacle, Barry Goldwater became fastidious. He told White House chief of staff Alexander Haig: "We can't support this any longer. We can be lied to only so many times." Richard Nixon had exceeded the generous quota of permissible lies.

This snapshot of a politician putting his foot down is from "The Final Days." To read it is to plunge again into the dark stream of Watergate, to smell the acrid ozone of baseness that hung over Washington two years ago. Authors Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein are scrupulously reportorial, and their narrative should subvert some Watergate myths.

It pleases many people to regard Watergate as a brush with an emerging police state, the Republic rescued by an intrepid Congress. The conventional wisdom is that Watergate was a manifestation of the "imperial Presidency."

But when, precisely, was Nixon's Presidency in its imperial phase? Nixon could not get his way with the school-lunch program, and he felt threatened by a "Jewish cabal" in the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Some emperor.

The plug-uglies behind the White House crime wave were not a bit like those Mohicans who crept through dry forests without rustling a leaf. From the burglars who couldn't burgle to the biggest enchilada of them all, they floundered, like insects in yogurt. As for Congress, it insisted that the central question was: "What did he know and when did he know it?" In retrospect the most interesting question is: "What did we all know, and when did we know it?"

A WOUNDED PUMA

By April 30, 1973, after Nixon's first television speech about Watergate, we knew he was stonewalling about several burglaries. By Oct. 20, 1973, the Saturday Night Massacre, we knew there were grounds for believing that he and some of his closest aides had been bribed by ITT, the dairy industry, and an international rogue (Vesco). We knew he had cheated on his income taxes and lavished public funds on his private estates. He had hired rather more thugs than necessary and had (in Madison's words describing a ground for impeachment) "neglected to check the excesses" of his hirelings. He fired a special prosecutor and was fighting like a wounded puma to hide tapes, which obviously did not contain evidence of innocence. By April 30, 1974, when the transcripts were re-

leased, we knew he had plotted obstruction of justice, urging blackmail payments and perjury. Yet most congressmen still were talking about the need to find a "smoking gun."

The unadorned truth is that if Nixon's lawyers had not sent the Senate Watergate committee a memo containing an exact quote from a Nixon-Dean meeting, the committee staff probably would not almost inadvertently have caused Alexander Butterfield to volunteer information about the taping system. And Nixon would still be President. *

'OUR DRUNKEN FRIEND'

Woodward and Bernstein have a nice sense of such contingencies, and they have a gift for details that illuminate a narrative like lightning flashes. For example: Kissinger despised Secretary of State William Rogers and delighted in demeaning him. Haig relished recounting how, in 1971, when he was Kissinger's obedient servant, Kissinger dispatched him to Rogers's office to make sure the Secretary's television was on when Nixon made the surprise announcement that he would visit China. As Haig would tell the story, Rogers, who had no knowledge that Kissinger's negotiations with the Chinese had succeeded, was mortified. And Kissinger was tickled by Rogers's suffering. (Rogers disputes Haig's story.)

Haig joked about a homosexual relationship between Nixon ("our drunken friend") and Bebe Rebozo, and imitated what he called Nixon's limp-wrist manner. Kissinger sneered at "our meatball President" who couldn't fathom "anything more complicated than a Reader's Digest article" and who would cause "a nuclear war every week" were it not for Kissinger. Kissinger cultivated movie stars, returning their calls before returning Nixon's calls. Kissinger reviled a colleague as a "psychopathic homosexual," and squabbled with Haig for the suite next to Nixon's in the Kremlin.

Ken Clawson, the White House's foremost public-relations expert, said the day before the transcripts were released: "Watergate is going to go away tomorrow." Nixon's inept attorney, James St. Clair, was so ignorant of Watergate details that another lawyer had to explain references in the "smoking gun" tape of June 23, 1972. Columnist Joseph Alsop used breakfast, lunch and intimations of Armageddon to lobby tormented Rep. Tom Railsback of Illinois, a key Republican on the impeachment panel: Railsback must support Nixon for the

nation's sake. (Railsback didn't.)

Sen. Hugh Scott fidgeted while J. Fred Buzhardt, a Nixon lawyer, administered a bit of preventive blackmail: support Nixon or the world may learn about Scott's abuses of power in influencing awards of government jobs and contracts. John Ehrlichman, who learned something about blackmail at the hands of Howard Hunt, called Julie Eisenhower the night before the resignation: her father should pardon him or he might embarrass her father.

Pounding the rug sobbing "What have I done? What has happened?" her father had been pounded shapeless on the anvil of Watergate. A hollow man accustomed to leaning on stuffed men, he had watched his brave daughter Julie criss-cross the nation defending him against charges he knew were true. By 1974, Nixon was no stranger to abasement. In the pathetic 1952 "Checkers speech," he invoked his wife's cloth coat. Then he was photographed weeping on Sen. William Knowland's shoulder. At his "last press conference" in California in 1962 he whined that he would not be kicked around any more. But by August 1974, he had been dragged along "the hang-out route" and millions of Americans had savored the distinctive tang of his private conversation. The transcripts were a best seller, and he was a laughingstock.

'I AM NOT EDUCATED'

The acid of resentment had ulcerated his personality until self-pity was his only unimpaired faculty. He had measured out his life in forkfuls of chicken à la king at banquets given by strangers. His long trek through the Valley of Humiliation had brought him to the White House East Room on Aug. 9, 1974, to tell his staff, and a national television audience, that his father had owned "the poorest lemon ranch in California." "Nobody will ever write a book, probably, about my mother." "I am not educated, but I do read books." Wearing glasses for the first time in public, he read Teddy Roosevelt's words about the death of his first wife: "And when my heart's dearest died, the light went from my life forever." Nixon was equating the loss of a political office with the death of a wife. Today, as one sifts the bleached bones of the Nixon Presidency, that last grotesquery still startles.