

A hard look

Unmaking of a president: A brutal saga, but true

By Saul Friedman
Knight News Service

"... the press... they have to call it as they see it."

— Richard Nixon, Aug. 9, 1974

WASHINGTON — The burglary that brought down a president happened in the spring. The cover-up came apart in another spring. And in that same season, the solemn proceedings toward impeachment began.

Once again spring has come and Watergate and Richard Nixon are back at the surface of the national consciousness.

Coincidental with the 1976 election campaign and the tourists who have flooded the capital to celebrate the bicentennial, the film of Watergate, "All the President's

Men," was the social event of the season.

The publication of the book, "The Final Days," an account of Nixon's fall from his stone wall, has become the controversy of the season.

And ironically the targets of the controversy and the criticism are the young men most responsible for the unmaking of a President — Washington Post reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein.

Not since the early days of Watergate, when their spectacular scoops based on anonymous sources were being castigated by Nixon's spokesmen, have "Woodstein" — as they are called — taken such heat.

Their stories exposing high-level involvement in the Watergate burglary and coverup proved to be

accurate. And their first book, "All the President's Men," received wide praise.

But their second, "The Final Days," has run into a chorus of cries, from old Nixon enemies as well as friends from the craft of journalism, that Woodward and Bernstein have at last gone too far.

Author-economist John Kenneth Galbraith, who applauded Woodstein's earlier triumphs, commented on their latest work by paraphrasing Ogden Nash: "If there is any principle to American journalism unknown, it is, leave well enough alone."

Former Watergate Special Prosecutor Archibald Cox said he saw no reason for publication of the book. He suggested that Woodward, Bernstein, their sources and their

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publishers "should be ashamed of themselves."

Cox's successor, Leon Jaworski, in what seemed like backhanded criticism, said he was writing his own book to "lay bare" some of the facts surrounding the last days of the Nixon administration.

Rabbi Baruch Korff, one of Nixon's staunchest defenders and a source for the book, said the authors and some of their sources are "pedestrian minds who cleave to the hearsay of Richard Nixon's presidency as their only alternative to obscurity."

Some of the criticism seemed to stem from the hucksterism and the politics surrounding publication of "The Final Days."

The book was released at about the same time the film version of "All the President's Men" premiered at the Kennedy Center here. The premiere became a dazzling celebration of a national nightmare and a personal tragedy.

Publication of "The Final Days" in time for the star-studded film opening almost certainly enhanced sales of the new book, for which Woodward and Bernstein were paid a \$300,000 advance. The publisher, Simon & Schuster, has printed 250,000 hardback copies (at \$10.95) and expects to sell 250,000 more, plus at least five million paperbacks, for rights to which Avon Books reportedly paid \$1.3 million.

This hard-sell exploitation of Watergate has helped feed the anger of the critics. But Galbraith said, "We can rightly boast that we are the first country ever to make the reward for uncovering wrongdoing greater than the reward for committing it."

The central criticism of the book, however, focuses on what it says about intimate life on the highest levels of government during the days of highest drama — and how it says it.

There is, for example, a passage describing a phone call on Aug. 6, 1974, two days before Nixon's resignation, between his son-in-law, Ed Cox, and Senate Republican Whip Robert Griffin of Michigan:

Cox sounded distraught. He was worried about the President's mental health. The President was not sleeping, and he had been drinking. The man couldn't take it much longer, Cox said. The President had been acting irrationally.

Griffin interrupted to say that he had been to meetings with the President recently, and Nixon had been rational.

That was the problem, Cox replied. The President went up and down. He came back from meetings and was not rational, though he had been fine at the meeting.

"The President..." Cox began. His voice rose momentarily. "The President was up walking the halls last night, talking to pictures of former presidents — giving speeches and talking to the pictures on the wall."... Cox was worried about Mrs. Nixon, too. She was the only one near the President late at night, and her strength was gone, her depression too deep to cope with anything that might happen. He hated to raise it, but he was worried about what the President might do to himself. "The President might take his own life."

Cox, who said he refused to be interviewed for the book, has called that story "absurd." And Griffin has declined comment.

Woodward told an interviewer that "we have seven sources on that story." The Cox denial, he added, was typical of those "who perfected the denial" who had no qualms about coming out and looking something right in the face and saying it isn't true." Bernstein said the denials come "from people who have a vested interest in a version of events which is not the truth."

Stories of Nixon's frequent irrationality were abundant during his last days, although none of the politicians and White House personnel telling those stories wanted to be quoted. Nor could they back them up.

Even now, an extremely knowledgeable source told Knight Newspapers that he had "no quarrel with the facts in the story" of the Griffin-Cox conversation, but wished to remain anonymous in deference to the Nixon family.

He pointed out, however, that several men, top-level advisers to then Vice President Ford, learned of the conversations soon after it happened, as they met to plan Ford's administration. Most were contacted by Woodward or Bernstein.

It is apparent throughout the narrative who some of their more important sources were, for the book describes the thoughts and hopes of many key characters. They included former Nixon lawyers Leonard Garment and Fred Buzhardt, House Republican leader John Rhodes and aides to Secretary of State Kissinger, if not Kissinger himself.

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The most publicized passage of the book, for instance, could only have come from Kissinger or from his office. Kissinger has a well-established reputation for leaking that which is in his interest.

Only Nixon and Kissinger were present in the Lincoln Sitting Room when the events described in the book allegedly took place on the evening before the resignation.

"Will history treat me more kindly than my contemporaries?" Nixon asked, tears flooding to his eyes.

"Certainly, definitely," Kissinger said. When this was all over, the President would be remembered for the peace he had achieved.

The President broke down and sobbed . . .

Kissinger kept talking, trying

to turn the conversation back to all the good things, all the accomplishments. Nixon wouldn't hear of it. He was hysterical. "Henry," he said, "you are not a very orthodox Jew, and I am not an orthodox Quaker, but we need to pray."

Nixon got down on his knees. Kissinger felt he had no alternative but to kneel down, too. The President prayed out loud, asking for help, rest, peace and love . . . He was weeping. And then, still sobbing, Nixon leaned over and struck

his fist on the carpet, crying, "What have I done? What has happened?"

Obviously, since Nixon was not interviewed for the book, this story had to come at least indirectly from Kissinger.

A final criticism is that, unlike history, which is documented and footnoted, and unlike journalism, in which facts, judgments or opinions are attributed to named or unnamed sources, "The Final Days" is written like a novel.

But Woodward and Bernstein insist, as they did in an interview, that their book is "a reportorial narrative, not a novelistic narrative. The only difference between this and newspaper stories is that this does not have the traditional attribution after every paragraph."

Despite the unusual form and the criticism that the book was in poor taste, none of the participants in those final days has specifically challenged an essential fact.