

New Forum

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My Mother

After reading Woodward and Bernstein's "The Final Days," I find there is one distortion in particular I cannot live with: the portrait of my mother. Woodward and Bernstein relegate her to the realm of a non-person: a woman who passively lived through the last months of the Nixon Administration. They portray her as withdrawn, self-centered and drinking heavily. A few critics have commented publicly on the references to my mother in "The Final Days." I am dismayed by their reaction: they are sympathetic but seem to accept the portrait as truth.

I am mystified by Woodward and Bernstein's willingness to ignore the public record of my mother's activities during the months covered in their book. They focus, for instance, on May 1974 and refer to "an occasional reception or a tea." Yet in that month my mother took part in nineteen public events in Washington and made separate trips to four states as well. In June and July she went on state visits to the Middle East and Soviet Union with my father. This is hardly the schedule of a reclusive heavy drinker tuned out to the needs of her family and consumed by her own problems.

In fact, in five and a half years of almost daily public activity she missed only two events. This is a remarkable achievement if one considers the usual pressures of life in the White House. It is difficult to fathom the strain of never-ending public scrutiny and to imagine what being guarded 24 hours a day, year after year, does to one's spirit. It takes a strong person to maintain a cool and balanced outlook on the world and an even stronger person to meet people and travel.

UNLIMITED PARTNERSHIP

"The Final Days" is being promoted as a precise and detailed account of my father's state of mind and every action. It seems to me that a complete profile should have called for a more serious attempt to examine his partner of 36 years, especially the role she played in the Administration right up to "the final days." My mother has been profiled and interviewed hundreds of times and, as a result, most of her actions and beliefs are recorded. Even a cursory glimpse at the Pat Nixon file in The Washington Post morgue of articles should have suggested to Woodward and Bernstein that the woman, orphaned at 17, self-educated,

who has represented the United States in 75 countries around the world, faced death by mobs in Caracas and met with fortitude the cruel disappointment of political defeats, was in August of 1974 a courageous and strong woman. The nebulous, weak figure of "The Final Days" is not the same person.

Several other current characterizations miss the mark as well. I find it ironic that my mother is known today as the perfect old-time political wife: tactful, self-effacing, in the shadow of her husband. In reality, she is the most independent and self-sufficient woman I know. She had an unlimited view of her role as a political wife. My sister, Tricia, was three weeks old when my mother joined full force the first campaign for Congress in 1946. During the next two decades she was an invaluable and dedicated participant in my father's political and government career. As First Lady she traveled more widely than any of her predecessors, including unprecedented trips to the U.S.S.R., People's Republic of China and the first solo visit by the wife of the President to Africa.

SHATTERED DREAMS

In the White House, my mother refused to be confined to one "First Lady project," saying instead, "People are my project." For her support of people helping people, she became known as the nation's "First Volunteer." She was undaunted by up to five hours of correspondence each night because she believed people who wrote deserved a response. She saw a mission to make the White House more open and accessible and more physically beautiful. Through her persuasion and hard work, an unprecedented 500 paintings and antiques were donated to the White House collection between 1969 and 1974. She inaugurated public tours of the gardens and special tours for the handicapped so that, for the first time, they could touch historic objects such as Abigail Adams's coffee urn. Just as in the House, Senate and Vice Presidential years—and the years out of office—she was a partner in the fullest sense.

When I think of my mother seeing the dreams and goals, which she and my father shared and hoped to work toward during his second term in office, shattered, I remember Anne Lindbergh's words on suffering: "Stoicism is courageous, but it is only a halfway

house on the long road . . . a shield. In the end one has to discard shields and remain open and vulnerable."

I believe those words describe my mother. People who have labeled her "superhuman" or "Plastic Pat" underestimate her. She is a woman of tremendous self-control because all her life self-control has been necessary simply to survive. She is a woman of dignity who does not seek pity from others or feed on pity herself. But she has grieved, she has wept.

'LOVE BEARS ALL THINGS'

The flashes of bitterness and anger at what happened, the remorse for this path taken, that rejected, all these feelings exist. But the overwhelming emotion is a willingness to remain open to love and life. This willingness was never more evident to me than during the year and a half of Watergate. There is no doubt in my mind that my father would not have had the heart to withstand the pressures, or for that matter the bitterness of the Vietnam war years, if my mother had even slightly wavered in her commitment to him and what he was trying to accomplish. In 1968, I asked my mother why she, an intensely private person, supported the decision to seek the Presidency. She answered: "He's a great man, a man of destiny." She was to repeat those words in 1974 when friends asked what sustained her.

My mother gives meaning to the words in the thirteenth chapter of I Corinthians: "Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." This extraordinary spirit she possesses is one reason why, in the face of the gossipy history of "The Final Days," I want to describe my mother as I know her. There is another reason I am writing. I cannot forget something my mother told me when I was 13. She said you should always express the love you feel in your heart because the moment is precious. Without a doubt, one of the yet unwritten stories of the "final days" is of the courage and love personified by Patricia Ryan Nixon.

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