

Our Tasteless Society



Andrew Tully

WHAT IS most troubling about the excitement over Woodward and Bernstein's "The Final Days" is the deterioration of good taste among people one might reasonably expect to be guardians of that special quality.

I speak of those, not special friends but persons of what we call "a good background," who find delectable conversational material in the authors' portrait of Mrs. Richard Nixon during the last painful months of her husband's administration.

It is shocking. These are people concerned about their children's morals and threats to the environment. They would not, I think, do a nasty thing. Yet, at cocktail parties and other social gatherings, they smack their lips over Woodward-Bernstein's "revelation" that in those "Final Days" Patricia Ryan Nixon was an unattractive recluse who resorted to solitary drinking bouts.

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OF COURSE our society has become slatternly. If a fad is chic, it is accepted, however untidy. We look with scorn on the drunk who is sick all over the rug, but we welcome those trendy ideas that soil our lives. The guest who has the temerity to question the artistry of a dirty movie is not asked back. In our 1984 vernacular, good taste is bad, bad taste is good.

Thus, I welcomed Julie Nixon Eisenhower's defense of her mother in Newsweek (reprinted by Woodward's and Bernstein's employer, the Washington Post). In the context of our dishev-

eled times, it is 100 per cent square. That is to say, Mrs. Eisenhower said some nice things about her mother. But what is important is that she produced some statistics to set the record straight.

Julie Eisenhower noted that the authors of "The Final Days" focus on May, 1974, and refer to "an occasional reception or a tea." In fact, Mrs. Eisenhower wrote, "in that month my mother took part in 19 public events in Washington and made separate trips to four states as well."

As the tragedy matured, in June and July, "she went on state visits to the Middle East and the Soviet Union with my father," Mrs. Eisenhower continued about her mother. "This is hardly the schedule of a reclusive heavy drinker tuned out to the needs of her family and consumed by her own problems."

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INDEED it is not. I see no reason to question Mrs. Eisenhower's data. The stuff of it is available to anyone for checking at the White House, as she well knows.

Also, I find astonishing in its dedication to duty the fact that "in 5½ years of almost daily public activity," Mrs. Nixon "missed only two events."

Richard Nixon, of course, brought ingominy upon himself. He betrayed a public trust, and gets no defense in this space. But it is disgusting to find people, smug under the patina of respectability, publicly enjoying the leering, voyeuristic villification of a good woman simply because she is Mr. Nixon's wife.