

Two Women in Archway

By William Safire

WASHINGTON, Aug. 21—In what was laughingly referred to as the election campaign of 1972, President Nixon made a token foray into New York State's Westchester County and wound up at the Pocantico Hills estate of Gov. Nelson Rockefeller.

The reception was held in the palatial indoor sports house, a tennis court with two huge fireplaces at either end. The Rockefeller and Nixon staffs mingled, their old rivalries stifled by circumstance, with the Rockefeller people envious of the hauteur of Presidential power and the Nixon staff envious of the hauteur of Rockefeller wealth.

Framed in a mezzanine archway overlooking the entrance hall, amid giant portraits of the Rockefeller brothers in World War II uniforms, two women sat apart from the staffs. They were old friends with memories to share and secrets to keep.

One was Rose Mary Woods, longtime secretary to Richard Nixon; the other, Ann Whitman, former secretary to President Eisenhower and, after he left office, secretary to Governor Rockefeller.

When they first met, in the early fifties, the relationship of the two women was secretary of the President to secretary of the Vice President. Ann Whitman was much closer to the center of power, but she soon reached an understanding with Rose Woods and

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would provide a quiet channel into the Oval Office for Rose's boss whenever the gate was barred by Eisenhower chief of staff Sherman Adams.

Both ladies left Washington in 1961: Rose to follow the defeated Nixon to California, Ann the retired Eisenhower to Gettysburg. Both came to New York a few years later, Ann to work for Nelson Rockefeller's Presidential bid, Rose as secretary to lawyer Nixon. Although Rockefeller people treated Mr. Nixon as a pariah, Ann would help her swamped friend with answering fan mail late at night, until a time came when it appeared their bosses might once again be rivals, and they discreetly parted.

Miss Woods watched Mrs. Whitman and her boss make a bid for the Presidency in 1964, bravely taking the wave of hatred from the Goldwater forces at the San Francisco convention; Rose made sure Ann knew that when the galleries went wild

after the Goldwater acceptance remark defending extremism, her boss, Mr. Nixon, sat in stony silence.

The two ladies were not in communication while their bosses competed for the nomination in 1968, but their life experience crossed in a curious way after Mr. Nixon's victory.

Chief of staff H. R. Haldeman, studying the Eisenhower staff structure, was struck by what he termed "the Ann Whitman end run." He became determined to limit access to the President to one door—controlled by the chief of staff—and not to permit Rose Woods to control an alternative entry, as Ann Whitman had.

After a fierce battle, President-elect Nixon decided that Rose Woods would not have direct access to the Oval Office. The desk that Ann Whitman had occupied with Eisenhower, and that both women had hoped would be occupied by one of them again, went to an assistant to the chief of staff. Rose was humiliated; in silent fury, she and her boss rode down in New York's Pierre Hotel elevator in what an associate later described as "the longest elevator ride ever taken by a man who had been recently elected President of the United States."

During Nixon's term, despite the slight downgrading of her job to help Haldeman avoid the "Whitman end run," the relationship of Rose and Ann was that of President's secretary to Governor's secretary: Rose was closer to the power, and after Haldeman's fall, as close as one could get.

The other day, as Rose was clearing out the files of her boss's shattered Presidency, she watched Ann's boss being nominated Vice President. She put in a call to her old friend and the two ladies wished each other well as their ships once again passed in the night.

Perhaps in that archway at Pocantico, or after the latest flip-flop of fate, the two women may have reflected on the vicissitudes of politics. Rose's roller-coaster had gone from the bottom (the 1952 fund crisis), to the top (the 1960 nomination), to the bottom again (political disaster in 1962), back up to the top (election in 1968), finally crashing through the bottom a couple of weeks ago. Ann's had started at the top (the Eisenhower years), gone to the bottom (the 1964 Rockefeller humiliation) to a lingering limbo that seemed to have no future in the early seventies, to the top, or close enough to the top, today.

What could these two stalwart Ohio-born women tell us, if they were not the intensely tight-lipped repositories of all the confidences of the Republican party of the past generation?

They could tell us there is no security atop power's greasy pole. More important, they could tell us that there is no permanent defeat certain for the man who keeps trying. Most important, they could tell us that loyal partisans can maintain contact, in friendship and in civility, through all the slings and arrows of outrageous Fortune and billion-dollar fortunes, to come out in the end with mutual respect.