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The tearful prelude to resignation

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WASHINGTON — "I was in this race as a boy. . . ." Richard M. Nixon's voice trailed off. Then he sobbed, the tears streamed down his face.

That started George Aiken, the Republican senator from Vermont and that body's oldest member. Like most of the other congressmen in the room, Aiken had known Nixon a long time.

It was about 8 p.m. Thursday in the cabinet room. In an hour, the President would be on television with his emotions under control. But just now, he was sitting at the cabinet table, weeping noisily and turning the city's most powerful men into a group of blubbering babies.

Nixon paused to regain control. The story went on about his boyhood footrace and how he had been lapped. "But I stayed and still beat one fellow by an inch," Nixon said. "I never was a quitter."

That caused Nixon to start crying again, hunching over and sobbing loudly. He fought for control once more. "I hope I haven't let you down," he said.

According to one congressman attending, the last statement set off another round of tears. "It was an emotional binge," he said.

The session was just one of the final hours of a man who underwent total humiliation with the world watching. Trying to piece together exactly what happened and how Nixon lived it produces only fragments.

Was Nixon forced to resign? By his staff? By his Republican leaders in Congress? Answers to what went on behind the scenes are hard to come by.

"Listen," said Alexander Haig, his eyes flashing. "I'm the only one who talked to him about it — just me and the family. No one forced him. He made this decision all by himself — by himself, get it — just like he made all the decisions."

The Marine Band inside the White House had struck up a tune as Haig blurted the statement. Gerald R. Ford was now President and Haig, still taut, was mingling with guests at the inaugural reception.

The music seemed to calm him. His voice became even. "This town is full of instant experts . . ." The interview was over.

There were no questions about Nixon's final minutes at the White House. It was a pathetic scene that will haunt those who watched it on the South Lawn of the White House.

Nixon left trying to disguise what everyone knew.

He seemed to glide over a red carpet flanked by an honor guard, his face was a frozen thing, Gray showing through his tanned features, a smile fixed and scary. As he mounted the steps to the waiting green and white helicopter, he turned.

Awkwardly, he flung his right arm across his torso and then threw his arm in a giant wave that almost made him lose his balance. He recovered and extended both arms in his campaign victory sign.

Inside the helicopter, Nixon took his seat but the reflection off the plexiglass window hid his face. For more than a minute, as the rotors gained speed, all that some could see was his hand, fingers extended as most photographers will request.

"Oh, God," said one crestfallen White House aide, "Why did he have to go this way."

But it was Nixon who decided on both the helicopter and the circumstances for his final departure. He would be president now if Julie Nixon Eisenhower had prevailed.

"Julie was the fighter and she kept the family solid against resignation, said one insider. "And, she just didn't say, 'Daddy don't do it.' She made one tough case."

Until sometime Wednesday, Nixon was siding with his younger daughter. Julie had told reporters earlier this summer that her father would not resign — even if he got only one Senate vote. He needed 34 to survive as President.

"He didn't give a damn about how many votes he got," said one aide. "He was just set against establishing a precedent for presidential resignation."

There was a "Julie" camp among some Nixon aides.

But on the other side was the hard-nosed Haig. It was Haig who personally carried another resignation message — he told Spiro T. Agnew last fall to quit as Vice President or risk jail.

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"Haig had decided on resignation on Sunday at Camp David," said one source. "He recommended it to the President."

"Maybe we had a gambling chance until the transcripts were released Monday," said one White House aide. "But there was no way we could get 34 votes in the Senate after the Monday transcripts. That was the hard evidence, the smoking pistol."

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While Washington was in turmoil Monday, Nixon sought the calm of the Potomac River. Lack of rain kept it low and smelly. But the Nixons boarded the yacht, "Sequoia," for dinner and a cruise.

At about the moment the boat pulled away, Rep. Charles Wiggins, R-Calif., was leading the charge of Nixon supporters now calling for resignation and impeachment.

"He knew his statement and the transcripts meant it was all over," an aide said of Nixon.

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Just when Nixon made up his mind to leave may be a secret he will always keep. But he broke the news to his family at the evening meal Wednesday. There is a picture to prove it.

There is Nixon embracing the leader of the "Julie camp," both in tears. "They took it hard," said Ollie Atkins, the White House photographer who recorded the scene.

"You got tears in your eyes even if you saw him after that," said one longtime aide.

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That was the way it was when his staunchest congressional supporters assembled in the cabinet room Thursday night before he told the nation he was resigning.

There, he broke down completely, crying himself out before his television speech.

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Nixon managed to choke the tears back as he said farewell to his cabinet and staff Friday morning.