

Betty Beale: Washington

The Nixon women— were they aware?

WASHINGTON — The question that grabbed Americans throughout the Senate Watergate hearings was Sen. Howard Baker's: How much did the President know and when did he know it? Ever since Richard Nixon's resignation, Washington has been wondering:

"How much did Pat know and when did she know it?" And how about Tricia and Julie? Only the three Nixon women and a former President can answer this question, but there are some signs which indicate the timing of their enlightenment.

To begin with, it seems doubtful that the President would have told the three women who adored him, who stood by him, who publicly defended him to the end, that he had lied to all Americans about knowing of the cover-up, that in fact he had instituted it.

According to Mrs. Nixon's comments in an interview held before the GOP convention in 1972, such behavior would have been totally inconsistent with the precepts he had preached. At that time, when asked what traits of character her husband most prized, she replied without hesitation:

"Honesty. I can remember him lecturing the girls about that a long time ago. I remember the first lecture he gave them. They were telling him about how some people cheated in exams, and he was so shocked he told them it was important to be honest — honest in every way — to speak their minds and be straightforward."

During the long grueling period of Watergate, Pat Nixon walked in dignity, held her head high and said over and over again, "I know the truth and the truth has sustained me."

But could she have known the truth when she was making long-range plans this summer for both Christmas 1974 in the White House and spring 1975? If she had been familiar with the contents of the June 23, 1972, tape, would she had been picking out Nixon china just six weeks before her husband resigned? Not every administration has had its own china, so this is not something a First Lady would order unless she expected to be around to use it. Particularly, since it is not paid for by the government but must be bought with privately-raised funds.

It was not until 10 or 12 days before Nixon resigned, when the Judiciary Committee voted to impeach him, that Pat said it was not a good time to raise money for the china, so she ceased making those plans. It was only then that she stopped working on new ways to improve the mansion she had contributed so much to.

Was Mrs. Nixon caught unaware by the revelations of the June 23 tape? One daily associate replied, "My guess is that she was surprised, and so were Julie and Tricia." Another associate said, "I feel sure she didn't know about it, nor the girls either." Said still another, "I can only guess but I would guess she was in the dark."

Julie, whose sincerity in proclaiming her dad's innocence shone like a beacon light from her face, was telling someone the weekend before the Monday the tape was made public, "Everything is going to be all right." Then pausing, she added for the first time an expression of doubt, "Unless you know something I don't know."

How painful it must have been for her, Tricia and her mother to stand behind President Nixon during the most excruciating 17 minutes in presidential history, when he said good-bye to his staff and praised the character of his parents without mentioning the three women on the platform who were still lending their support. But the three stood there in silent dignity with only the tears in their eyes and the sympathy on their faces to speak for them.

The social impact of the Gerald Fords and the Nelson Rockefellers Washington, and by reverberation happens the whole country, can give meaning to that overworked "beautiful people." BP may stand for the jet-setting rich, their time and money spent on new fashions and new pleasures — boredom — sometimes lives. Their over-pleasure cause the Pleasure Society.

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