

## New Books

### Before the Fall

by William Safire  
Doubleday, 704 pp., \$12.50

Bill Safire was never a Nixon intimate the way Bob Haldeman and John Ehrlichman were, or even as close to the President as Ron Ziegler, Pat Buchanan, or Dwight Chapin. Like Herb Klein, Peter Flanigan, and Bob Finch, Safire was, in his own words, an "old Nixon hand," who describes his White House position briefly this way:

I could expect certain privileges of access and could exercise the right to be forthright, and after a time was expected to present an iconoclastic position. Until I discovered in 1973 that I had been wiretapped in 1969, I was sure that my proven loyalty gave me the widest latitude in associating with reporters and political adversaries, who were known to Nixon as "them."

Perhaps Haldeman, who had ordered the tap on Safire's and many other White House phones (including Henry Kissinger's), ought to have listened more carefully to Safire, who sent Haldeman a memo in 1971, with a carbon copy to John Dean, which began: "Why don't we make more of the fact that ours is a scandal-free administration?"

Mr. Safire's long book is the detailed inside story of the pre-disaster years: the whole of the first term, after Nixon squeaked by Hubert Humphrey; the great triumph in foreign policy and the quicksand at home; the President's growing psychopathic distrust of journalism and anyone connected with it; and, little by little, Haldeman's takeover, with Ehrlichman, of a captive loner who happened to be President.

One has only to read of Nixon's choosing Haldeman over loyal Rose Mary Woods to realize the depths of Haldeman's growing power. If Haldeman could interpose himself between the President and Rose Mary Woods, Safire rightly says, "he could damn near do anything." Rose hated Haldeman from the moment Haldeman barred her from the genuine power of immediate proximity (most confidential secretaries to Presidents have an adjacent office; Rose's was downstairs). When, finally, they all drowned in the bursting dam of Watergate, Rose Mary Woods hated

Haldeman for another reason: He had badly served The Boss, to whom she had been utterly loyal for a generation, through disaster and triumph.

The fascination of this enormously long chunk of contemporary history lies in its candor. Safire pulls no punch. He describes Nixon, who comes out of the book not too badly at times, as:

an amalgam of Woodrow Wilson, Niccolò Machiavelli, Teddy Roosevelt, and Shakespeare's Cassius, an idealistic conniver evoking the strenuous life while he thinks too much. . . . Nixon is both great and mean, bold and vacillating, with large blind spots in a remarkable farsightedness . . . and balanced judgments must give way to split decisions. He may be the only genuinely tragic hero in our history, his ruination caused by the flaws in his own character.

In any case, the book is required reading for anyone with the faintest interest in the Presidency or in the way the thread of American history has unfolded lately.

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