

SR Books

The Crack in the Myth

Breach of Faith:

The Fall of Richard Nixon

by Theodore H. White

Atheneum/Reader's Digest Press

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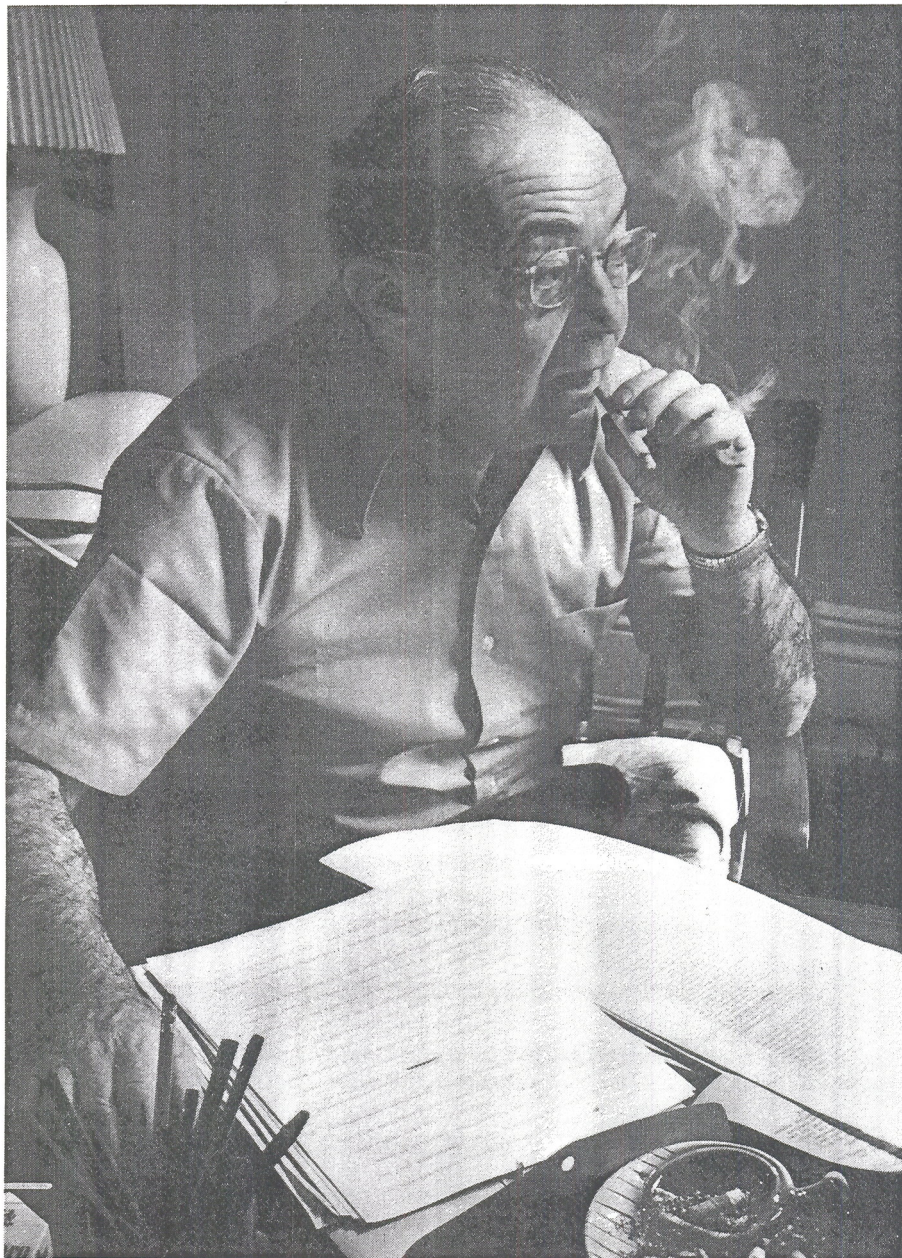
Reviewed by Bruce Bliven, Jr.

No more than half a dozen pages into Mr. White's first chapter, which is entitled "Let Justice Be Done," I realized something that had seemed almost incredible to me minutes earlier: that Watergate (in a broad sense) and Richard Nixon's guilt in the elaborate maze of associated crimes could actually seize my attention all over again, almost as if I had not heard about them before. I had felt surfeited with the subject to the point of numbness and had imagined that my brain's exhaustion, combined with my stomach's queasiness, might keep me well clear of any excitement over the subject for years to come. This was wishful thinking, of course, for the many aftermaths of Watergate are not to be avoided by any of us in the future, however numb we may be.

It is not the first time Mr. White has confounded me in this way; I have been dubious, prematurely and incorrectly, about all four volumes of his series, *The Making of the President* (1960, 1964, 1968, 1972); but none of these Presidential campaigns had worn me down to anything like my Watergate exhaustion. This time, I felt certain, White's magic will leave me inert. I am on to his journalistic tricks, and he cannot catch me again with his brazen verisimilitude—the exact

time of the event, the portentous room-number citation (as if it mattered greatly), the graphic but irrelevant detail ("the light fell from white porcelain rosettes to the throng crowding seats and galleries"). Once again, I was wrong.

My surliness is neither here nor there, and I mention it only because nearly all of the readers of *Breach of Faith*—I assume they will number in the tens of thousands—are going to be pleasantly surprised, if not astonished, as in my own case, that Mr. White can lead them back to the Watergate complex of events, where they didn't much want to go, and make them like it. It is a triumphant feat. He has artfully intermixed what we remember well with much that we have forgotten about the recent past—or perhaps missed completely in the deluge of words when Watergate dominated all the other news—and he has produced a fast-moving narrative, reaching back as far as 1952, and even farther, that illumin-



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was there, he saw it happen, he had lunch with one of the principals the next day, and so on—helped him most of all. If he had not written the book, he could have been a principal source for material.

Above all, Mr. White's memory allows him to recall the changes that he has seen in the American party system, and in the American Presidential system, since 1952—the date he chooses, a trifle arbitrarily, as his narrative's beginning. The Democratic and Republican conventions were both held that year in Chicago.

THE STORY OF WATERGATE, as Mr. White sees it, is the story of the Nixon Presidency as a whole. The story of the Nixon Presidency is one of great pressures and strains bearing down on the man in the office as the party system, on which the Presidential system once rested, gradually came apart. ("Perhaps 1952 is as useful a date as any to start with," Mr. White writes, "and Chicago in that year was probably the best place to listen to the first groaning of the hinges, as the world turned and America changed.")

At some point in those 20 years, Mr. White theorizes, the grinding forces of history were bound to crack a man with flaws of character, whether small or great; and, Mr. White says, in President Nixon's case his "perception of power, at which he thought himself a master, was flawed, as his character was flawed." When the strains bore down on him too heavily, Richard Nixon's character, like a faulty bearing in a giant machine, did crack.

The great open question, which Mr. White asks but cannot, of course, answer, is the extent to which Mr. Nixon has damaged the Presidency by betraying his office, by damaging the faith of the American people that at least one man—the President—surely stands for law.

Perhaps he has damaged it beyond repair, in which case our system will end in disaster. Still, it is possible, instead, that the result of our collective nightmare will be purifying; and it is possible that *Breach of Faith*, by sharpening our focus on the problem, may help us recover from what we have suffered.

Mr. White sums it up: "If his humiliation can heal the breach of faith in government which he provoked and make way for the election of a trusted President in 1976, then his resignation may go down as the last, best act of his career—tragic, haunting, but necessary for the Republic." □

ates who Nixon is, who we all are, and what our country has become. Finally, as if this feat of explication had unlocked Mr. White's reticence to intrude himself, the reporter-popular historian, into his story, he has mixed in a considerable quotient of his own personal opinion, his own informal political philosophy. This philosophy is most explicit in his final chapter, which like the book is titled "Breach of Faith." (It begins starkly: "The true crime of Richard Nixon was simple: he destroyed the myth that binds America together, and for this he was driven from power.")

The word for Mr. White's mixing of these ingredients is alchemy. In part he transforms common elements into precious material; but I am also thinking of how very close he comes to achieving the impossible: he writes something much like a history based on an incomplete, flawed set of notes. (Mr. White, who does not pretend that he can do more than can be done, in several places assists the bona fide historians of Watergate, probably not yet born, who will someday write the definitive accounts, by pointing out the gaps in his reporting and explaining who can fill them in, if they ever get around to doing so.) He manages a long perspective and a remarkable degree of fair detachment—quite a trick when it comes to scenes in which the alchemist-historian is an actor—even as he reminds the reader that the book was written hard on the heels of the perspective-shattering news.

LOOKING BACK at Mr. White's journalistic career, one can see he has been preparing to write *Breach of Faith* for more than 20 years, ever since he returned to the United States from assignments in China and Europe, started writing about national politics for the *Reporter and Colliers*, and then began doing the notable *Making of the President* series. All the while, Mr. White has, of course, been diligently watching Presidents and would-be Presidents, and studying the contexts in which they achieved, or failed to achieve, our highest office. He has been studying Mr. Nixon—investigating is perhaps the name of the process—since 1955, when he wrote his first magazine piece about him; and eventually he became something like a Nixon confidant. All these years of reporting were capital on which Mr. White could draw; and although he acknowledges all kinds of expert assistance in compiling the record, obviously Mr. White's own memory—he