

James Reston Reports:
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ITTINES clipping, same column, filed
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For other refs, and clippings on Nixon's
visit to Lincoln Memorial, see this file
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Let the Voter Beware

New York

THEODORE WHITE'S "Breath of Faith — the Fall of Richard Nixon" — the best of his superb books on the presidency — reaches the conclusion that Richard Nixon was an "unstable personality" whose conduct at the end had become "increasingly erratic."

It is almost too painful to wander through the twisting conspiracies of Nixon's mind again, but at the beginning of another presidential campaign, it raises a serious question for the future: How are presidents to be protected from the unbearable pressures of that office, and, if this is impossible, how is the nation to be protected from irrational presidents?

This question became particularly acute with the invention of atomic weapons, and intercontinental ballistic missiles. For the first time in history, the Republic could then be destroyed by a sudden attack from abroad — before the Congress could ever get through the downtown traffic in Washington to consider the crisis.

This is obviously the most extreme and melodramatic challenge to a president's judgment, since it could involve nothing less than the future of the human race, but even this apocalyptic vision cannot be ignored.

THE QUESTION of presidential stability and judgment comes up more often in less dramatic circumstances. This is what Teddy White's excellent book is all about, how personal fears or insecurities or vanity or pride or self-righteousness can contribute to the tragedy of Vietnam or the pointless stupidity of Watergate.

Also, the overwhelming influence of the president on his personal aides, and their misplaced loyalty to him rather than to the Constitution and laws of the Republic created what Woodrow Wilson called "the atmosphere of politics."

White, as always, is a superb reporter in this book, but to report history, he had to venture into psychiatry, in order to explain the burglaries, the sabotage and espionage, the cover-up and the final collapse of the Nixon Administration.

In short, he had to deal with the frailty and complexity of personal character under political pressure. In telling of the last days of Nixon, White is very admiring of General Al Haig, who, he says, on August 1 of 1974, "became Acting President of the United States," the central figure in "the management of an unstable personality."

THE INSTINCT of the President's staff to protect the President even when he acts in an irrational manner is best illustrated by William

Satire's account of Nixon's activities on the night of May 8-9, 1970 — what Satire calls in his book "Before The Fall," "the strangest, most compulsive, and perhaps most revealing night of Nixon's Presidency."

That was after Nixon's decision to "clean out the sanctuaries," in Cambodia, after the Kent State campus tragedy, and the ensuing student march on Washington.

Between 9:22 p. m. on May 8, and 4:22 a. m. on May 9, Nixon made 51 telephone calls to members of his Cabinet, his staff, magazine editors, foreign service officers, newspapers reporters, repeating calls to one or the other, talking about his family, his grandparents, the Civil War, — sort of a sleepless, compulsive nightmare of talk — after which, to the consternation of the Secret Service, he got into his car at dawn and drove to the Lincoln Memorial to argue with the startled young people who had come to Washington to demonstrate against his invasion of Cambodia.

What are the safeguards against this irrational conduct, and the silence of a President's worried but loyal associates? There are very few. To begin with, candidates for president are almost the only job-seekers in Washington whose personal record and character are not checked out.

It is standard procedure for the FBI to look into the personal qualifications of potential Cabinet members, Supreme Court judges, ambassadors, generals, and even press secretaries. But not candidates for president.

Agnew and Eagletons slipped into vice presidential nominations with less supervision than a potential mayor of Kansas City or a candidate for county judge in Sycamore, Ill., or a sheriff in Fauquier county.

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THERE IS probably no way to be sure about the physical and emotional health of future American presidents, but maybe some things can be done. It is one of the misfortunes of American politics that, after Eisenhower, and the brief experiment with Kennedy of the younger generation, we jumped back to candidates in their sixties — Ford, Rockefeller and Reagan in the Republican party, and Jackson, Humphrey and Muskie in the Democratic party.

We do not know whether these men can stay the course. Humphrey has been sick, and has made a remarkable recovery, but we cannot be sure. Wallace is crippled in ways we cannot discern, but he leads the Democratic popularity polls. Teddy Kennedy, we are told, has "reformed" but we do not know.

What Theodore White's book, and Bill Safire's book, suggest is that maybe we should look more carefully at presidential candidates before their "Breach of Faith," and "Before The Fall."

The flaws in Nixon's character were actually clear as far back as his original campaigns for the House and Senate, but they were not examined. Next time around for the presidency, maybe the parties and the voters should be more careful.