

Books of The Times

NIXON

What Only History Can Tell

By CHRISTOPHER LEHMANN-HAUPT

BEFORE THE FALL. *An Inside View of the Pre-Watergate White House.* By William Safire. 704 pages. Illustrated. Doubleday. \$12.50.

William Safire's "Before the Fall: An Inside View of the Pre-Watergate White House" is not exactly a book with a whole lot going for it. For one—relatively trivial—thing, its appearance has been preceded by the news that its original publishers rejected the manuscript and that their legal right to do so was backed up through arbitration. And for a more important thing, the book attempts to show what was good about the Nixon Administration (as well as what was bad) at a time when the shock of what was bad has not yet begun to wear off and a time when it is hard to relish what was good, even for those who sincerely wish to. So one reads "Before the Fall"



Alex Goffroy

William Safire

with a measure of sympathy for the underdog and feels almost relieved that there are things to be said in its favor.

For it is, most obviously, an anecdotal book, as chockful of incident and color as the most extravagant of political novels (only better, because the characters and events are real). Whether he is telling a lengthy, seemingly pointless anecdote about the citizenship-oath ceremony for his English-born wife, which was held in Vice President Agnew's office and presided over by this "cornball-patriotic, square little . . . Nixon-Agnew kind of judge" whose name turns out in the last line of the four-page story to be "Sirica," he said, and he spelled it out for me. 'S-I-R-I-C-A'; or filling in surprising character-facets of men like John N. Mitchell, H. R. Haldeman and John D. Ehrlichman (the villains are always more fascinating than the heroes, though, come to think of it, the portrait of Henry A. Kissinger is possibly the best thing in the book)—whenever Mr. Safire tells a story, he plays it for maximum feistiness, wit and drama.

Refreshing and Conscientious

And it is, most refreshingly, a Presidential speech-writer's book. Which is to say that by sticking conscientiously to his role as one of President Nixon's three key writers, Mr. Safire has not given us the skewed version of history that, say, Eric Goldman did in "The Tragedy of Lyndon Johnson" (where an underview was inflated into an overview). Yet which is also to say that he tells us a great deal about what happened. For President Nixon's writers were not simply pale ghosts or experts on particular issues; they were expected to embody their perspectives and even to dissent and negotiate when there were policies to be shaped.

And the book is, most cleverly, an attempt to revise the current myth of the Nixon Administration. To offer just one

small but typical illustration: Mr. Safire climaxes the first third of his account—which takes us on a rising note of triumph through Mr. Nixon's comeback, his nomination and election, up through his decision in April, 1970, to invade the Cambodian sanctuaries—with a lengthy and moving account of "The Night of the Lincoln Memorial," when Mr. Nixon ventured out to meet and speak with young antiwar demonstrators. This chapter serves four positive purposes, from Mr. Safire's point of view. It shows us Mr. Nixon at his best—sensitive to the feelings of the war protesters and yearning to communicate with them outside the glare of publicity. It demonstrates how misleading were the press reports that Mr. Nixon was awkward and uptight that night, and could think of nothing to talk to the young people about except football. It shows us how that misconception came about. And it caps what might be seen as a disastrous stage of Mr. Nixon's public career with a grand sense of triumph.

Unfortunately, this scene serves a fifth purpose as well, and one that is not so positive. It reminds the reader that if the Cambodian crisis can be dramatized with a footnote as its climax (for surely, no matter how misrepresented it may have been by the media, Mr. Nixon's visit to the Lincoln Memorial is no more than a footnote), then one is seeing history from a very special perspective indeed. And having become aware of this, one becomes of other things as well.

A Certain Artifice

We notice, for instance, that while Mr. Safire's portrait of Mr. Nixon himself is complex and penetrating, his attempts to bring Pat and Julie Nixon and Charles G. Rebozo to life fall almost comically flat ("Bebe wasn't always secretive and brooding; he could be warm, generous, and his smile was the most ingratiating thing about him"). Therefore there is a certain straining in the perspective. And we notice that while Mr. Safire doesn't try to lift the blame for Watergate from Mr. Nixon's shoulders, and even admits that its roots reached deep into Mr. Nixon's contradictory character (which was "magnificent in defeat and vindictive in victory"), still, the chapter in which he summarizes this argument is called "Bizarre Incident" and comes after a chapter one of whose points is that Mr. Nixon would have won in 1972 under any circumstances ("The Campaign That Never Was"), and before two chapters showing how the "Christmas Bombs" that fell on North Vietnam won a "Peace With Honor." Therefore there is a certain artifice in the perspective.

We notice, in other words, that no matter how persuasive Mr. Safire may be in showing the positive side of the Nixon Presidency—the shaping of a new international order, and the molding of a new domestic majority—in the last analysis he is still shoving Mr. Nixon's best foot forward, or, to put it more bluntly, still selling the President. And it is hard to take him seriously. For it is up to historical perspective, 50, 100, 200 years from now to weigh the assets and debits of the Nixon Administration—not the man at whom we see Mr. Nixon looking, in one of the book's concluding reminiscences, "to see if I had written that down."

On this incident, see this file 8, 9 May 70; other references included with 9 May 70 transcription of KPFA News.
See also Chronology entry 7 May 75, Nixon (mental health).