

Book Says Nixon Prayed, Wept on Eve of Departure

On the night before he announced his resignation as President, Richard Nixon retired alone to the Lincoln Sitting Room upstairs in the White House. Then he summoned Henry Kissinger, his Secretary of State. The following extract from the new book, "The Final Days," describes that scene.

By Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein

There was the President in his chair, as he had seen him so often. Kissinger reflected on the fact that he really didn't like the President. Nixon had made him the most admired man in the country, yet the secretary couldn't bring himself to like his patron. They sat for a time and reminisced about events, travels, shared decisions. The President was drinking. He said he was resigning. It would be better for everyone. They talked quietly—history, the resignation decision, foreign affairs.

Then Nixon said that he wasn't sure he would be able to resign. Could he be the first President to quit office?

Kissinger responded by listing the President's contributions, especially in diplomacy.

"Will history treat me more kindly than my contemporaries?" Nixon asked, tears flooding to his eyes.

Certainly, definitely, Kissinger said. When this was all over, the President would be remembered for the peace he had achieved.

The President broke down and sobbed.

Kissinger didn't know what to do. He felt cast in a fatherly role. He talked on, he picked up on the themes he had heard so many times from the President. He remembered lines about his enemies, the need to stand up to adversity, to face criticism forthrightly.

Between sobs, Nixon was plaintive. What had he done to the country and its people? He needed some explanation. How had it come to this? How had a simple burglary, a breaking and entering, done all this?

Kissinger kept talking, trying to turn the conversation back to all the good things, all the accomplishments Nixon wouldn't hear of it. He was hysterical. "Henry," he said, "you are not a very orthodox Jew, and I am not an orthodox Quaker, but we need to pray."

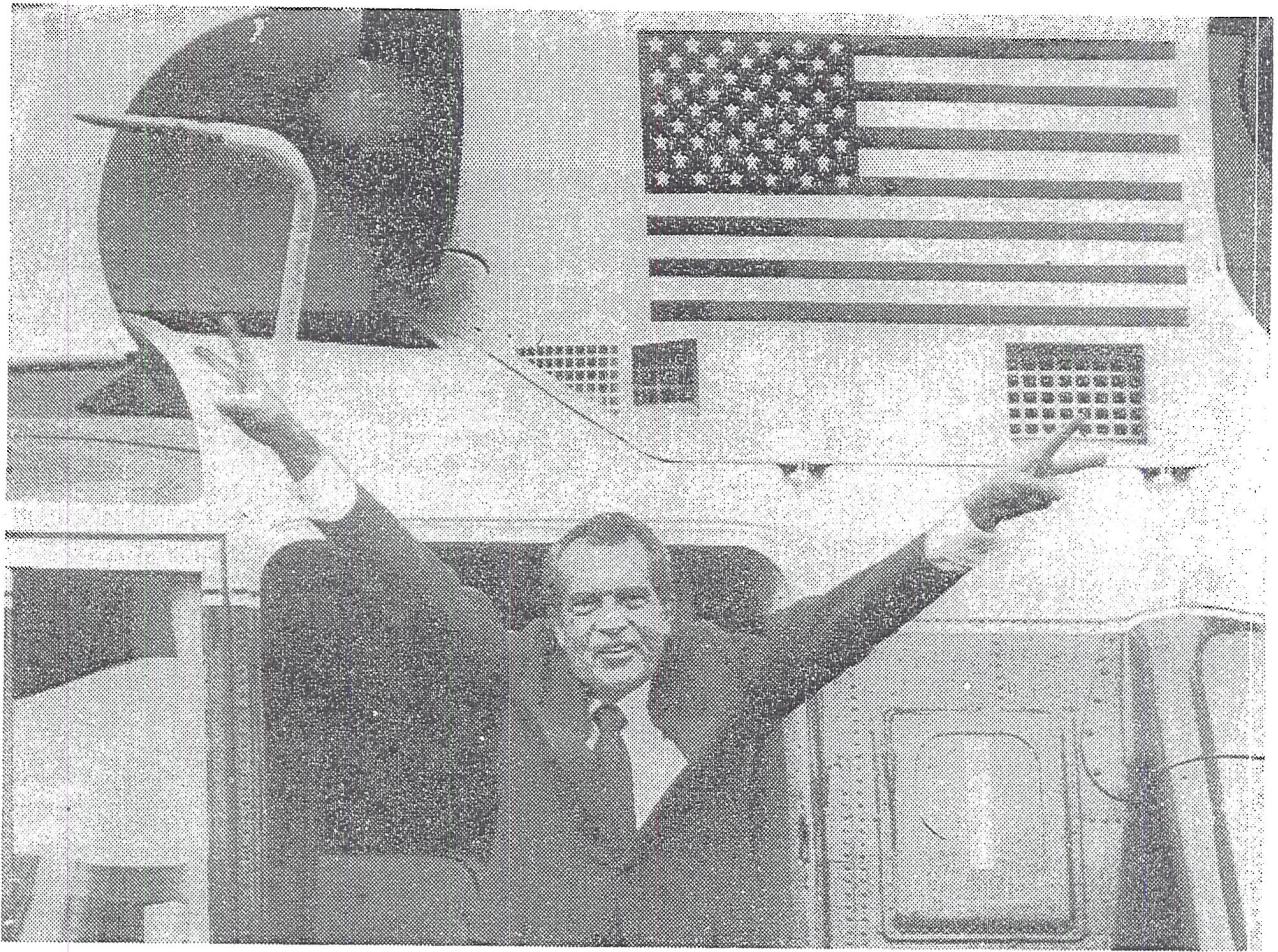
Nixon got down on his knees. Kissinger felt he had no alternative but to kneel down, too. The President prayed out loud, asking for help, rest, peace and love. How could a President and a country be torn apart by such small things?

Kissinger thought he had finished. But the President did not rise. He was weeping. And then, still sobbing, Nixon leaned over, striking his fists on the carpet, crying, "What have I done? What has happened?"

Kissinger touched the President, and then held him, tried to console him, to bring rest and peace to the man who was curled on the carpet like a child. The President of the United States. Kissinger tried again to reassure him, reciting Nixon's accomplishments.

Finally the President struggled to his feet. He sat back down in his chair. The storm had passed. He had another drink.

Kissinger lingered. He talked on, building a case, pour-



United Press International

President Nixon waves farewell as he boards helicopter on leaving the White House Aug. 9, 1974.

ing his academic talents into a lecture on why Richard Nixon would go down in history as one of the great peacemakers of all time. "You made the tough decisions," he said.

The two men had a few more drinks. Their conversation drifted around to personalities and to the role Nixon might be able to play once he was out of office. He might be an adviser, or a special ambassador. Nixon wondered if he would be exonerated by history. Kissinger was encouraging; he was willing to say anything. But he was thinking that Nixon would never escape the verdict of Watergate.

As he got up to leave, Kissinger realized that Nixon had never really asked as much of him as he had that night. Vietnam, Cambodia, Russia, China—they all seemed easier. Weak in the knees, his clothes damp from perspiration, Kissinger escaped. And he realized that though he was the President's only top adviser to survive Watergate, he had never really been consulted about resignation.

As he walked through the West Wing corridor to his office, Kissinger thought he had never felt as close to or as far from Richard Nixon. Never as close to or as far from anyone he had ever known.

Lawrence Eagleburger and Brent Scowcroft, key Kissinger aides, were waiting. It was almost eleven. Kissinger looked somber and drained. He did not shout orders, ask for messages, make phone calls or demand reports. He was clearly upset. To get control over his own tensions, Kissinger began talking about the encounter. The President was definitely resigning, he said.

"It was the most wrenching thing I have ever gone through in my life—hand holding," Kissinger added. The President was a broken man. What a traumatic experience it had been, what a profound shock to see a man at the end of his rope. He was convinced that historians would at least treat Nixon better than his contemporaries had, but it might take some time before that particular revisionist history would be written.

Scowcroft mentioned that he thought it significant that the President had turned to Kissinger for sustenance in his most awful moment. Not to Gen. Alexander Haig, the White House chief of staff, not to any of the others.

"Henry," Eagleburger said, "at times I've thought you're not human. But I was wrong. I've never seen you so moved."

The phone rang. It was the President.

Eagleburger picked up an extension to listen. That was the custom—Kissinger never took a call alone. Eagleburger was shocked. The President was slurring his words. He was drunk. He was out of control.

"It was good of you to come up and talk, Henry," the President said. "I've made the decision, but you must stay. You must stay on for the good of the country."

Eagleburger could barely make out what the President was saying. He was almost incoherent. It was pathetic. Eagleburger felt ill and hung up.

The President had one last request. "Henry, please don't ever tell anyone that I cried and that I was not strong."

© 1976 by Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein. All rights reserved.