

Pat Nixon: 'The Tragic Figure of a Woman . . .'

BOSTON — She was perceived by many to be the perfect wife, the picture-book wife, self-effacing, loyal, the Outstanding Homemaker of the Year in 1953, the Mother of the Year in 1955, the Nation's Ideal Housewife in 1957.

For years she made her own slipcovers and curtains and clothes, and when her husband was Vice President she spent some of the "few evenings I had to myself" taking his suits out of the closet and ironing them.

She was brought up to be dutiful and she was. She was brought up to work hard and she did. She held her chin up (in public) and never spilled her tea (in public) and never criticized her husband (in public) and she wore a good Republican cloth coat. She never complained. Once she campaigned with three cracked ribs and once with a swollen ankle, and she kept it a secret. She said that she was never cold and never bored by her husband's speeches and, "If I have a headache, no one knows it."

The most outrageous thing she ever did, some thought, was to smoke a cigarette in public in 1973 with her son-in-law, David Eisenhower. The most typical thing she did was to memorize Robert's Rules of Order before she would preside over the Senate Ladies Group. She tried to be perfect, and in later years, many called her Plastic Pat. Her answer was that "You can adjust to anything if you want to."

Now, as we pore over the revelations in Woodward and Bernstein's "The Final Days," we are told about a Pat who spent the last days of the Nixon years in a separate bedroom with a separate bottle, while her husband confided his feelings to the portraits on the walls and the tape recorder down the hall.



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We glimpse them together in the deadly silence of their dinner time.

We see the tragic figure of a woman who prized self-control above all things faced once again with the lack of any real control over her own life. We see her as Richard Nixon's ultimate victim and again she becomes a symbolic reference point for us in a time of changing definitions about what a wife-woman is and does and owes.

Thelma Ryan grew up in a time

when self-denial was a virtue, and self-fulfillment was a vice called selfishness. People didn't talk much about masochism. She believed in willpower and never called it repression. She may believe in it yet.

Like so many women of her age and place, she gambled everything on marriage—on the marital draw—and she stood by her man. She hated politics, but she went on the roller coaster ride of her husband's career with every hair in place. She used her enormous

strength to hang on with white knuckles and a tight smile.

She was the "helpmate," the "better half," the woman behind the man, the partner with no voice in the decisions, the woman who knew her place. "Once he makes his decision," she said, "I'm a good sport and will do all I can to help him." She told a reporter that if she wrote a book she'd call it, "I Also Ran."

Once, we now are told, she thought of leaving her husband. But she was then an unemployed mother of two teenage daughters, and, in 1962, there were fewer choices. In any case, she was a good girl, a good sport. Later, people noticed that whenever they left a public scene Pat and Dick dropped arms and moved perceptibly away from each other.

In 1968 she told Gloria Steinem angrily, "I've never had time to think about things like . . . who I want to be or whom I admired, or to have ideas. I never had time to dream about being anyone else. I've never had it easy and I'm not like you . . . all those people who had it easy."

Years later a White House reporter said to her, "You've had a good life," and she paused and answered, "I just don't tell all." Now, one version of that "all" is being told and, according to it, she is a victim and hers is a horror story, a female tragedy that touches even those of us familiar with stories of women's lives of passive desecration.

Perfect Pat, Plastic Pat. There is a scene, not in "The Final Days," that will haunt us: the vision of these two husband and wife for 40 years, alone now, in a 14-room house in San Clemente—a home with no exit.