

Books

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Shrewd Look At Guardians Of the Gate

THE PALACE GUARD. By Dan Rather and Gary Paul Gates. Harper & Row; 326 pp.; \$8.95.

Reviewed by
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THE NIXON ERA is over, but the autopsies are only just beginning. Now that normality has returned to the White House brace yourself for a spate of books about what went on there while the President secluded himself from all who failed to pass his personal janissaries, H. R. Haldeman and John Ehrlichman. One person who incurred the displeasure of the President and his Palace Guard was Dan Rather, who covered the White House for CBS and remained a thorn in the President's flesh till the day he resigned.

This is Rather's account of the Nixon years as President, crisply and cuttingly chronicled with Gary Paul Gates of CBS News. The book confirms other sources in its picture of the



DAN RATHER

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Nixon White House as a besieged fortress in which "we" guarded the President against "them" outside. It is not a Watergate book but goes beyond it to Nixon's political philosophy and the strategy and tactics he devised to enhance his Presidency and cut down his political enemies.

As such it offers the most penetrating inside look we have yet had into an Administration which immured itself in an inner sanctum to which only the chosen few were admitted. Future histories of the Nixon years may tell us more about policy-making on the highest levels, but until then we have this book — a shrewd, insightful, sophisticated collective portrait of the President's men by a hard-to-fool correspondent and his collaborator who maintained a mostly adversary relationship with the White House janissaries.

Nixon, they say flatly, gathered around him the most powerful White House staff ever assembled. "Never had so much authority with so little accountability been delegated to so few." Haldeman and Ehrlichman were

guardians of the gate. "While Ehrlichman held sway over Nixon's domestic policy, Haldeman held sway over Ehrlichman. Between them they kept piling brick after brick on to the Berlin Wall until it became the greatest barrier ever to stand between an American President and his Cabinet, the Congress, and the citizenry who put him in office."

The book throws a bright light on two major areas until now the subject largely of surmise. It seems clear from *Rather and Gates*

that Nixon suffered from a severe inferiority complex vis-a-vis the Kennedys. The threat he believed he would face from Teddy Kennedy in 1972 led him to offer a Cabinet post to Daniel P. Moynihan, a Harvard professor and Kennedy man, and to submit to Congress a welfare reform bill drawn by Moynihan. After Chappaquiddick the Kennedy threat vanished. Moynihan was gradually eased out and Nixon took a much harder policy line.

The book's other major contribution lies in its corrosive portraits of Haldeman and Ehrlichman and other of the President's men. Some of the authors' anecdotes verge on the incredible, such as that of Haldeman diving off a yacht in the ocean off Biscayne Bay and swimming to shore because he had received a message that the President wanted him. And can you picture Haldeman standing outside the President's door eyeball-to-eyeball with an irate John Connolly who insisted on seeing the

President at once? It was Haldeman who blinked.

Ehrlichman was more ruffled in appearance than Haldeman but no less fanatical in "protecting" the President. In time, say Rather and Gates, "he came to regard the Cabinet and agency heads as irrelevant nuisances." Everything had to conform to the "zero defect system" (that is, be perfect). Colson, the authors add, reached a position of authority commensurate with that of Haldeman and Ehrlichman because "not only did he despise the Kennedys but he was a Bostonian who despised the Kennedys."

The final irony in this sharp-edged, no-holds-barred book is that it was Haldeman, the former advertising executive, who persuaded the President in 1970 to install the White House taping system as a way to sell himself to posterity. Instead it was the tapes that brought Nixon down.

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