

Two months after his resignation Richard Nixon was on the critical list. Here, in their own words, is the story of how the former First Family has survived the crises of the past year

BY TRUDE B. FELDMAN

The best decision I ever made was choosing Pat to be my wife, my partner in life," Richard Milhous Nixon said recently. "I've had prestige, power and even, at times, some money. Those things come and go—as they have with me. But Pat has stood by my side during good and bad times alike. What more could any man ask?"

The former President, recuperating at San Clemente, was looking back at a turbulent year that included his resignation from office last August and a close brush with death during his stay

at Long Beach Memorial Hospital in October.

As he talked, he also seemed to be looking ahead to the 35th anniversary of his marriage to Thelma Catherine (Pat) Ryan in June.

The most terrifying moment of those 35 years came last October 29th when Richard Nixon went into shock after surgery. For several days he was on the critical list. During that time Pat Nixon remained in the hospital, waiting for the brief periods, sometimes only a few minutes each, that the doctors would allow her to share with her husband while he was under intensive care. At times, when he was unable to talk—there were tubes connected to various parts of his body—she would hold his hand and reassure him that he would pull through.

"When I came out of shock," Mr. Nixon recalls, "and I'm told I was more dead than alive, Pat was there—you can imagine my feelings, just knowing she was with me . . ."

"In the weeks after that, if it hadn't been for her, I might not have survived. I think it's her immense capacity to comfort and encourage that pulled me through. Pat's devotion kept me alive—I doubt if I would have made it without her. Her love, her strength, her constant reassurance, her faith in me as a human being and as her husband led me out of the depths."

By his own account, the months following his departure from the White House were a time of severe physical and emotional stress for Richard Nixon. To those who have known Pat Nixon well for many years,

it seems as though much of her life up to that point had been a preparation for sustaining her husband through the most difficult period of his life. Born in Nevada, the daughter of a gold miner and raised on a farm, she was orphaned at 17 after nursing both her mother and father through terminal illnesses. While caring for her brothers, she took a succession of jobs, including one for six months in a hospital for the tubercular, and then put herself through college on her own efforts, graduating from the University of Southern California with honors in 1937.

The kind of strength she developed from those experiences was reflected years later in a rare comment on herself: "Even if I were dying, I wouldn't let anyone know."

One of Pat Nixon's closest friends,

Helene Drown, lives in California and sees her often. Of those critical hospital days she says, "There were four or five hours when her husband almost died. For the first time in the thirty-seven years I've known Pat she felt helpless. She is not a member of an organized church, but she has great faith. She told me, 'All I can do is pray to God and trust in the ability of the doctors.' And when he pulled through, she said, 'Thank God. Except for the grace of God and the doctors, he would have died.'"

"Pat herself was in a state of shock during those days," Mrs. Drown adds. "On a few occasions, when the President was finally off the critical list, we would walk on the beach. When she would recall their White House years and some of the things he did, I was moved to tears. Once she said, 'I used

to catch myself resenting the fact that Dick's time with the family was so limited, but then I would say to myself, his work is what's important now—we can wait . . . and I admired him for it. I don't think that anyone can understand what Presidents go through—you have to live it to know—the hard decisions, the terrible responsibilities, the endless hours, calls in the middle of the night, the fishbowl living . . .'"

In public, however, Pat Nixon betrayed no sign of the strain she was under. Dr. John C. Lungren, Mr. Nixon's physician, recalls, "She was always cheerful, cooperative and completely in control of herself. The only time I saw her /turn to page 115

When the Nixons lived in the White House, such private moments were rare. Now they are a crucial part of his convalescence.

THE QUIET COURAGE OF PAT NIXON



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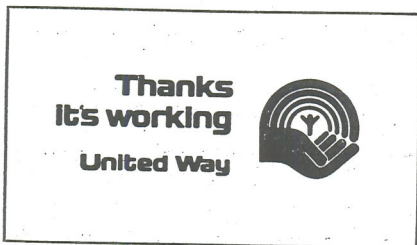
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upset at the hospital was when she heard reporters asking me skeptically, 'Is he really ill?' Because she knew how serious his condition was, that question brought her to tears."

Even then Pat Nixon maintained her silence, and when her husband left the hospital to return to San Clemente, she began nursing him back to health. He has been on a salt-free, low-cholesterol diet that includes almost no sugar, even though his doctors have been anxious to have him gain back some of the weight he lost.

"She hovers about me to make sure I eat enough," Mr. Nixon says. "Even when I suspect she's not hungry herself, she'll sit down and eat with me as an inducement to get me to eat more."

Jack Drown, Helene Drown's husband, describes a recent visit: "The President and I were watching a game on TV, and Pat brought our lunch in on trays. On Dick's tray there was a little sign: THIS MEETS YOUR DOCTOR'S STANDARDS FOR GOOD HEALTH. My tray had a sign, too: 265 CALORIES: THIS MEETS YOUR REQUIREMENTS FOR LOSING WEIGHT."



The Nixons' daughter Tricia Cox says, "Mother's courage is rare. She boosts everyone's morale. She keeps her spirits high, and her mood is infectious. She's really super with Daddy, especially at a time like this."

A visitor to "La Casa Pacifica," the Nixon home in San Clemente, can confirm Tricia's observation. Many of the presidential trappings are gone: There is a volleyball net stretched across the concrete area that used to serve as a helicopter pad, weeds are growing around the small golf course. The atmosphere is less official, more homelike. On one recent occasion the former President was walking with a guest when Mrs. Nixon came out of the main house carrying an electric heater evidently in need of repair. There were smudges on her hand that indicated she had been trying to fix it herself. Mr. Nixon took his handkerchief and wiped away the spots, then excused himself and went indoors to call a staff member to arrange for the repair job.

There is an obvious glow of pride emanating from Richard Nixon as he talks about his wife. "Just having her around," he says, "is my best medicine today. When I'm in pain, she seems to feel the pain twice as much. When I awake during the night for a few minutes, she stays awake much longer worrying about me."

After years of public life that made great demands on them individually, Pat and Richard Nixon seem closer today than ever before. They are spending more time together, eating meals together and swimming daily in the pool. Occasionally they watch a ball game on television. "I'm getting to be quite an authority," Mrs. Nixon says. "I even have my favorite players and teams now."

Gardening is her favorite hobby; she is spending many hours outdoors. "I love to work in the garden here," she says. "I couldn't dig into the White House garden very much. It always had to be on display." With less help to keep up the grounds, Mrs. Nixon has replaced many

of the rosebushes with simple ground cover, but since her husband is partial to roses, she has planted some outside the windows of the dining room and his study.

Pat Nixon, who has always been an optimist, tells friends she has come to terms with their life today: "I love my husband, I believe in him and I think he has been a great President. Nothing has changed that." If anything gnaws at her today, it is her concern that history will forget Richard Nixon's positive contributions. She hesitates to talk about the events leading to his resignation but maintains that, when the whole story is understood, people will agree that her

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husband never sought personal gain. "Like everyone else," she says, "he has probably made mistakes—no one is infallible. But he has done many good things for our country and the world."

As always, she is reluctant to talk about herself but when pressed she acknowledged that "I think I've done some worthwhile things over the past twenty-six years. My girls have also done countless things to help others—and not just political things. But I could never say publicly, 'I'm so proud of my husband and daughters.' I'm just not made that way."

Traveling with Pat Nixon around the country and abroad, I would marvel at her stamina and her ability to greet people with genuine warmth—a handi-

capped child would get as eager a greeting as a prime minister. In her travels she would make a special point of visiting schools and hospitals: The most characteristic picture of Pat Nixon's White House years was of her hugging children wherever she went. "I love it when kids call to me and say 'Hi, Pat.'" she said. "I love that warm, friendly feeling."

During White House receptions and state dinners she would startle visitors by remembering minor incidents that had happened years before and recalling the names of people she had met only casually. (One diplomat from Zambia was so impressed with her that he named his daughter after her.)

Pat Nixon intends now to do her share to help history render a positive verdict on the Nixon administration. In her

organized way, she kept a simple diary of her varied White House activities that should be useful during the writing of the Nixon memoirs. Moreover, she has not lost her fighting spirit. While it is true, as her husband contends, that "Pat is a shy and modest person," her modesty conceals an iron will and an indomitable spirit. Last year, soon after the President's resignation, she confided to a friend that she is sorry that her husband did not destroy the White House tapes rather than making them public. "They're like a private diary," she said. "I wish he had burned them."

But Pat Nixon does not spend time anguishing over what might have been. She believes in a positive approach to life. "I always look forward, not backward," she says. "I don't have time to be depressed. It doesn't accomplish anything to sit around and brood—that can only lead to self-pity."

Soon after the Nixons returned to San Clemente, she was voted number one in an annual poll of the women most admired by American women. Asked how she feels about this recognition, Pat Nixon expressed appreciation for the honor, but characteristically added:

"If I had a choice, I'd rather be admired less and have my husband tormented less. I'd prefer that people concentrate on a fair assessment of him and his Presidency." ■

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