

By William Safire

SAN CLEMENTE—"You and I haven't had a cup of coffee together in a long time," said Richard Nixon. He had fixed this pot himself, and hastened to assure a frowning secretary that it was the first cup he had tasted all afternoon. Evidently he has been forced to cut back on his Navy coffee-guzzling habit.

The last time I had seen him was during the final week of his Presidency, nine months ago, when he was under as much strain as any political figure had ever undergone. Since then Mr. Nixon had survived his brush with death and conflicting reports had come out of San Clemente that the former President was either morose or confident, still in poor health or on the mend.

Mr. Nixon has not given any press interviews since his resignation, and will not give one now; he will say his piece in his own time and his own way. Under those rules, a visit by a former colleague turned journalist hardly seemed a good idea before, but on the day that Russian-built tanks knocked down the gates of the presidential palace in Saigon, it seemed to me useful to history to spend some time with Mr. Nixon under any rules.

No hard news in this column, then, either direct or indirect, about the Nixon reaction to the collapse of South Vietnam, the embittered charges of ex-President Thieu or the triumphs of isolationism in the United States. Only some general impressions of mine, for what they are worth:

He looks much better. The haunted, hunted look of the final days in the

White House-turned-bunker is gone. He is ruddy from the California sun, able to talk for an hour or so with a visitor without visibly tiring; the hand holding the coffee cup is steady.

He sits with his leg elevated on the ottoman of the velvet-covered chair that traveled with him from his New York apartment in the sixties, to the Lincoln sitting room, and finally to the office of what used to be called the Western White House, on Coast Guard property near Camp Pendleton, California.

Mr. Nixon is not unmindful of the irony of Camp Pendleton's being the receiving point for so many of South Vietnam's refugees. It is as if they and he, who had been locked together throughout his Presidency, wound up abandoned on the same doorstep though there is considerable difference between their straits and his. A cartoon in the Los Angeles Times shows a refugee, bowl in hand, at the door of Mr. Nixon's home: "We're your Camp Pendleton neighbors, Mr. Nixon; may we borrow a cup of rice?"

Such mocking by fate cannot but hurt, and the renaming of Saigon as Ho Chi Minh City—which had been the Communist goal all the while they had been professing talk of peace—surely smarts as well. But Mr. Nixon remains publicly silent, not even putting out any "It is known that he believes" leaks, because he is determined not to say anything—or empower anybody to hint at anything—that might be construed as less than total support of President Ford and Secretary Kissinger.

Talking to Mr. Nixon now is a more heartening experience than anticipated because he has begun to look ahead,

and no longer spends all his time brooding about everything that went sour. He is well briefed on current affairs, presumably from intelligence sources as well as from newspapers, and I hope he will have something to say about foreign policy before the fall of 1977, when his book is scheduled to appear.

Meanwhile, he has started work on his memoirs. He is limited to a few hours each day, during a period of convalescence that he expects to last until the fall, when he plans to increase his work load. He has been forced to begin at the beginning: Because the records of his White House years have not yet been made available to him, he has begun pouring over materials about his early life, his family, his beginnings in politics, his Vice Presidential years, the 1960 defeat and his comeback.

Needless to say, this is not the portion of his memoirs which the public breathlessly awaits, and he is aware that what he has to say about the eighteen months following his reelection will determine how anything else he has to say will be received.

Mr. Nixon massages his knee and flexes it to get it to work, then rises to walk a visitor to the door. He wonders what souvenir he can give the visitor to take away, since there are no more Presidential cuff links or golf balls for the concluding gesture he likes to make. A picture of Nixon in retirement—"the blue-coat shot," autographed by him, and not by Rose Woods for him—hits the spot.

In parting, the former President says matter-of-factly, "I'm surviving." And so he is; for the Ishmael of American politics, life goes on.

* 30 APR 75