

After the Fall, the Fictions

By ANATOLE BROYARD

BREACH OF FAITH: THE FALL OF RICHARD NIXON. By Theodore H. White. 373 pages. Atheneum, \$10.95

So now we know everything about the Watergate affair except why it happened. And we may never know that because it is doubtful whether even Richard M. Nixon does. All historians can do is to speculate about his reasons for making the choices that he did. They can turn psychoanalysts and try to arrive at these reasons by getting inside the man or they can fall back on sociology and talk about the climates of feeling that made up Mr. Nixon's personal weather. Theodore H. White does some of both in "Breach of Faith." He analyzes the lust for power of a President who had experienced poverty as a humiliation. He cites the bitterness of a man who had not one iota of charisma in an image-oriented age. He postulates the notion that the American counter-culture made Mr. Nixon feel that he was fighting a civil war for the country he loved and that all was fair in love and war. He very nearly suggests—and I wish he had—that in the extremity of his loneliness, Richard Nixon's behavior bordered on the autistic.



The New York Times
Theodore H. White

Recapitulation of Facts

Most of "Breach of Faith" is a blow-by-blow, you-are-there recapitulation of the facts, almost as if Mr. White were reviewing his own grounds for injury, for he was a friend of the former President as well as a definer of the Presidency itself in his famous "Making" series. He sounds as if he is writing more in sorrow than in anger. Sometimes he reminds me of those people who cry out warnings or exhortations to the characters on a movie screen. If only Mr. Nixon had done this or that at such and such a time . . . even at this juncture, it was not too late . . . though he does not come right out and say it, Mr. White seems to imply that Mr. Nixon was inhibited in his efforts to extricate himself by a touching sense of loyalty to his "team."

It may have well been that way in the beginning. And it would be easy to imagine that, once it was too late to tidy things up, Mr. Nixon's compulsively tidy character came apart under pressure. If ever a man had a reason to feel paranoid, he did, for he was one of the most fre-

quently attacked people in the country and he had just been elected by one of the largest popular votes in our history.

Mr. White is careful to give credit where he feels it is due. He says that Mr. Nixon brought American troops home; did more to protect our environment than any other President; introduced a cool and reasonable balance to the problem of integration. He was "masterful" in his foreign policy, especially in the arms lift to Israel during the Yom Kippur war. At times, the former President seemed to understand everything but people.

Desperate Under Pressure

Toward the end of "Breach of Faith," Mr. White seems to become a bit desperate under pressure himself. He is a best-selling historian, a man with a reputation, and he has to come up with something more than a dramatized rehash of the facts. In his other books, he "made" Presidents; if he had to unmake one, the story ought to have some of the trappings of Greek tragedy. There ought to be a universal lurking somewhere in the sleazy particulars.

Myth turns out to be the universal he is looking for. "The true crime of Richard Nixon was simple: He destroyed the myth that binds America together, and for this he was driven from power . . . the myth he broke was critical—that somewhere in American life there is at least one man who stands for law, the President. That faith surmounts all daily cynicism, all evidence of suspicion of wrongdoing by lesser leaders, all corruptions, all vulgarities, all the ugly compromises of daily striving and ambition."

The author goes on to say that "politics in America is the binding secular religion," and that the American people believe "that the Presidency, the supreme office, would make noble any man who held its responsibility. The office would burn the dross from his character . . ."

I don't know how Mr. White arrived at these conclusions, but they certainly do no jibe with my experience of my fellow Americans. It seems to me that it was the death of those very myths, before Mr. Nixon became President, that helped to bring about his downfall. And I cannot accept politics as a "binding secular religion" either. Agnosticism would be more like it. In any case, it is difficult to see this country as "bound" by anything at this stage of our history—certainly not by the "common faith" Mr. White refers to.

His belief in that common faith strikes me as romantic, if not downright sentimental. If such inspirational influences had actually made themselves felt, they would probably have saved Mr. Nixon's soul too. The former President just does not seem dimensional enough to destroy a myth. Why, he couldn't even persuade himself to destroy the tapes.