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Theodore White's Story Of the Fall of Nixon

BREACH OF FAITH: The Fall of Richard Nixon. By Theodore H. White. Atheneum; 373 pp.; \$10.95.

Reviewed by
John Barkham

HAVING twice placed Richard Nixon at center stage in his "Making of the President" series, it is only logical that Theodore White should now give us a third book on the unmaking of that selfsame President. In the years to come there will be a flood of such books, but it is safe to say that few will view the flawed character of Richard Nixon more penetratingly or dissect the fatal duality of his personality more accurately. Having enjoyed Nixon's confidence after his election triumphs of 1968 and 1972, White is better able to trace the historic sequence of errors that led to his downfall.

This book, in short, is not a crude hatchet job but a cogent analysis of an ambitious, suspicious, complex, devious, unloved man who, having attained ultimate power, believed himself to be above the law. Though Nixon will always be a fascinating character study for historians, White has not waited for the passage of time to give him the necessary historic perspective. His personal contacts with Nixon as candidate and President and with presidential staffers who saw no distinction between ends and means have yielded an acute, incisive analysis of Nixon's fall that readers will find fair-minded yet unsparing.

WHITE opens his book with the final scenes in the Nixon presidency as the deadly "variance" in the June 23, 1972 tapes were discovered and the President's obstruction of justice became plain to the world. This chapter is charged with high drama in White's best eyewitness style. Most of the President's men now realized for the first time that he had lied to them, to the Congress, to the American people for years.

Certain figures stand out in the scenes which end this strange, eventful presidency —

the Nixon lawyers and speechwriters shaking their heads in dismay, Secretary of State Kissinger earnestly advising the President to resign, General Haig serving as the country's Acting President, Senator Goldwater chosen by his Republican colleagues to bell the cat — and, hidden from them all, the haunted figure of the President torn between his natural inclination to fight yet aware that his cause was lost and disgrace unavoidable. White chronicles it all like some recording angel conscious of Nixon's inevitable end.

WHY DID a President elected by so massive a majority allow a trickle of misfortune to swell into an overwhelming torrent of lies and deceit that finally engulfed him? Given our 20-20 hindsight, one still marvels that so relatively trivial an incident as the Watergate break-in, which did not affect the election outcome, was not at once admitted and regretted as was the Bay of Pigs fiasco. A few heads would have rolled, but the incident would probably have been forgotten in the glow of Nixon's foreign policy triumphs.

But Nixon was not built that way. To confess error was anathema to an "outsider" who had clawed his way to the top, who trusted no one, who never confessed error. White pinpoints the moment on June 23, 1972, when the President almost casually crossed the line of the law, possibly without fully "realizing what he was doing." Thereafter it snowballed into a cover-up which ultimately reached avalanche proportions. Nixon's small initial mis-step, and all the bigger mis-steps which followed, stemmed from a contempt for his enemies, a hatred of the media, and a willingness to play "the politics of manipulation."

As White sees it, in using every instrument of power within and without the law Richard Nixon destroyed the presidential myth that has sustained this nation through two centuries — the myth that presidents will "faithfully execute" the laws of the land. The result has shaken the nation but has not, one hopes, weakened its trust in its governmental system.

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