

Chronicles of a Decline and Fall

Reviewed by
T.R. Reid

The reviewer is
Washington correspondent
for the Trenton Times.

On particularly cheerless days at his San Clemente Elba, it may come as some solace, to Richard Nixon, that assiduous collector of Historic Firsts, to know that he has inspired a Historic Most: his presidency seems destined to generate more memoirs, analyses and instant histories than that of any of his predecessors.

Spurred by their early discovery that Watergate sells, America's publishers are gushing forth enough Nixon volumes to satiate even the most heavily addicted Watergate junkie. Thus, though both J. Anthony Lukas and Clark Mollenhoff are Pulitzer Prize winners who had excellent sources in the Nixon White House, it seems legitimate to ask what their books can add to the voluminous Watergate canon.

In Lukas' case, the answer is thoroughness. Until the inevitable academician produces the inevitable four-volume treatise, Lukas' 626-page effort will stand as the definitive exposition of Nixon's decline and fall.

"Nightmare" is immensely rich in detail. Do you want to know the aliases of Anthony Ulasewicz? The color of CREEP's carpets? The etymology of "Abplanalp"? The fee Gordon Liddy had to pay the girl who paraded nude past Muskie's hotel room? It is all here, and all accessible, too, because Lukas has compiled a 46-page index (from "Abdul Jabbar, Kareem" to "Zunwalt, Raymond") that makes his book a valuable reference text.

Lukas shows exactly how one launders money through a Mexican bank. He provides a convincing explanation why George McGovern was never able to turn Watergate into campaign fodder ("reporters — shunned by the aloof, unavailable Nixon — focused instead on the easy, available stories about McGovern's staff troubles"). He offers a detailed schematic of how Henry Kissinger bluffed, backtracked and lied about his wiretaps — but still emerged untouched. He stops 47 times to profile the people he is writing about.

Yet the book never seems

cluttered. Lukas, a former New York Times man, has a nice way with the language — Woodward and Bernstein, for example, are described as "a bizarre hybrid, a kind of journalistic centaur with an aristocratic Republican head and runty Jewish hind quarters" — and he is a good story teller.

The problem for anybody in the Watergate book business, of course, is that any story gets stale in the 39th retelling, and there are times when Lukas is treading such familiar ground that even he fails to sustain interest.

Clark Mollenhoff, Washington bureau chief of the Des Moines Register and Tribune, has circumvented that problem by devoting half of his book to a review of some less familiar Nixon outrages — the Hoffa pardon, the Ernest Fitzgerald firing, etc. — that occurred during his 10 months as Nixon's White House "Ombudsman."

"Game Plan for Disaster" is valuable because Mollenhoff's own experience provides such a clear demonstration of how the Nixonians managed to subvert everyone they took into their fold.

Clark Mollenhoff is his own man; in 1960 he refused an invitation to join the Kennedys in Camelot because he was afraid he would lose his independence. Yet in 1969, when this same man warily accepted Nixon's offer, he was — for a while, at least — co-opted.

The Nixon men did it by sheer force of intimidation. At one point, for example, Mollenhoff received some

Book World

NIGHTMARE: The Underside of the Nixon Years. By J. Anthony Lukas

(Viking, 626 pp., \$15)

GAME PLAN FOR DISASTER: An Ombudsman's Report on the Nixon Years. By Clark R. Mollenhoff

(Norton, 384 pp., \$9.95)

damaging IRS information on George Wallace's brother. Murray Chotiner, the political hatchetman, demanded to see it, but Mollenhoff refused, citing "the extreme sensitivity" of tax information. Chotiner pressed; Mollenhoff held firm. But then Haldeman began leaning on Mollenhoff in his intimidating way and within a few days Mollenhoff "sent it through Bob Haldeman to the President with a premonition that Chotiner would probably receive a copy."

After a string of frustrations at the hands of the "Presidential captors, Haldeman and Ehrlichman," Mollenhoff had the good sense to bail out. He went back to his newspaper and enlivened the remainder of the Nixon years with occasional top-of-his-lungs outbursts — Lukas describes him as "an enraged bull" — at Ziegler, Kissinger and at Nixon himself.

The second half of Mollenhoff's book is a review of the Watergate affair; it is fairly humdrum, except for the intriguing revelation that the "provisional sentencing" play which John Sirica used to wring cooperation from the break-in culprits was suggested to the judge by Clark Mollenhoff.

Mollenhoff has not set out to present an exhaustive work on Watergate in the Lukas mold, but he occasionally finds a nuance that escapes even Lukas' exceedingly fine net.

In describing the fateful Supreme Court decision forcing Nixon to give up his tapes, Lukas looks only at the immediate impact of Warren Burger's opinion. But Mollenhoff, with the guidance of Harvard Law professor Raoul Berger, takes a second look and finds in the opinion "the seeds of dictatorship" that make another Watergate "entirely possible." For Chief Justice Burger, in a gratuitous dictum, not only legitimized executive privilege, but also established some grounds under which assertion of the privilege will be almost unchallengeable.

That result, Mollenhoff says, sets the stage for "another presidential power grab of Watergate proportions." He warns that "we cannot be content to believe that it will not happen again."

And that, finally, is why we should welcome these two additions to the mountain of Watergate literature. The more we know about the Nixon disaster, the better prepared we may be to keep future Nixons out of the White House.