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Nixon's Final Days

Our stories were denied and denounced when we warned in early 1974 that a darkly brooding Richard Nixon might attempt something desperate.

We wrote of his agony over Watergate, of his drinking bouts at Camp David, of his suicidal recklessness in Egypt, of a chilling remark about his power to plunge the world into a nuclear holocaust, of H. R. Haldeman's backroom talk about "one-man rule" and Nixon's "right" to run the country.

By the summer of 1974, we reported that Nixon's behavior so alarmed Pentagon leaders that then-Defense Secretary James Schlesinger took quiet precautions to prevent the White House from bypassing the chain of command and issuing unauthorized orders to the armed forces.

The public found these stories about their President a little hard to swallow. But now this most secretive of all Presidents has been dragged out of the shadows, and the real Richard Nixon stands exposed in the sun's harsh glare.

It took those indefatigable Washington Post reporters, Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, a solid year to illuminate the hidden Nixon. They interviewed 394 people, some as many as 17 times.

Their new book, "The Final Days," should be read soberly by the American people as a warning that they must choose their Presidents carefully. The book also gives substance to the stories we tried to tell while Nixon was still in office, stories so incredible that few people believed us.

We learned from his intimates that Nixon had a dual personality—the shy friend and ruthless politician. We described him on Aug. 5, 1973, as "a deeply private person, a warm, shy, sensitive man who sometimes woke up wondering whether he was President. 'I would have a feeling,' he told a friend, 'that I had something to tell the President. Then I would suddenly shake my-

self awake and realize I am the President.'"

We told how he had accumulated "psychological scar tissue as he drove himself into one bruising battle after another, slashing his way to the top, suffering inwardly from the political shellfire ... this lonely, suspicious President who fought so hard for public approval and was rebuffed so often."

For the private Nixon, the Watergate crisis was a lonely struggle. We wrote on Jan. 31, 1974, that "he is showing signs of strain. He is also drinking more martinis. Sometimes his friend, Bebe Rebozo, mixes a small pitcherful before they sit down together for an evening's relaxation.

We wrote about his "restlessness at night" and his long sojourns with Rebozo at Camp David in the Maryland mountains. On April 11, 1974, we reported that Nixon sometimes erupted "with rage and profanity. But most of the time, he has bottled up his feelings and has gone off to agonize alone."

Then he would emerge from his introspection and would appear quite normal. But he sometimes lapsed into ominous reflections. The secret minutes of a March 8, 1974, strategy session, for example, quote him as blurting out:

"I could push this button right here and in 20 minutes, 70 million Russians would be dead. And 25 minutes later, 70 million Americans would be dead." Then he added, almost as an afterthought, that "we must do everything in our power to get along with the Soviets."

On June 14, 1974, we wrote of Nixon's "stubborn determination to visit the Middle East," despite intelligence warnings that an Arab terrorist ring "might attempt to assassinate him. ...

There was worry in the policy councils, we reported, that Nixon might attempt to seize emergency powers. Instead, he gave up the presidency on Aug. 9, 1974, and went into exile in his San Clemente, Calif., estate.

* See SFC 7 Feb 76, for other refs to this remark.