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What Is History?

Having read Woodward and Bernstein's description of a drunken Richard Nixon, requiring Secretary of State Henry Kissinger to get down on his knees for joint prayer, and afterward figuratively tearing up the rug, my mind, for some unaccountable reason, went back to Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr.

Schlesinger once wrote a most readable history of the New Deal. It was entitled, "The Age of Roosevelt," and it appeared in several volumes, of which the first was called "The Crisis of the Old Order." In the first chapter of that volume, Schlesinger briefly describes a nation at the pit of depression, its banks closed, its people frightened. "We are at the end of our rope," Schlesinger quotes the weary President Hoover as saying, "there is nothing more we can do."

It was a sad, defeatist remark, the sigh of a man who had lost his courage and will; certainly not the kind of remark which schoolboys are taught to regard as "presidential." Naturally, the reader wonders, "How does Schlesinger know that Hoover said this?"

The answer is there. Right above the last quotation mark in the statement attributed to Hoover is a tiny, raised figure, "1." It is the designation of what people who care about accuracy call a footnote. The reader may now look in the back of Schlesinger's book under "1" in Chapter 1 and discover to his satisfaction that the Hoover remark was made to Hoover's press secretary, a man named Joslin, who becomes in this instance, Schlesinger's "authority."

It is not so with the new Woodward and Bernstein history. There are no footnotes and no "authorities." We are told that a drunken Nixon wailed to Kissinger, "Will history treat me more kindly than my contemporaries?" As he said it, report Woodward and Bernstein, "the tears flooded his eyes."

How do the authors know? There was no one in the room, according to their own report, except for Nixon and

Kissinger. Kissinger says he didn't tell them this story. Did Nixon? It seems unlikely. So there is no authority.

Just before this description we have Kissinger summoned to Nixon's office. "As he walked over and took the elevator to the second floor, Kissinger was angry."

Here we have two historians of Nixon's final White House days reporting on how a man felt as he rode up an elevator. Is it not natural for the reader to ask, "How do the historians know?"

Maybe there is a saving grace to this fictionalizing. Presumably, the chief characters in the Woodward and Bernstein book will dispute inaccuracies and write their own accounts in order to set the record straight.

But from the standpoint of history, is it well that the accounts of anonymous sources should occupy the minds of men for such time as it may take to prove or disprove them?

None of this is intended to disparage the exciting story which Woodward and Bernstein tell. If their story is wrong in some of its facts, we already know enough to realize that it is true in truth.

And it reminds us once more of the embarrassment we feel about the man we twice elected to our highest office. He misused us, lied to us, stole from us and came closer than perhaps even he thought to destroying us. Yet he lives now off the best we can afford while others who have committed far lesser crimes go to jail.

It's a readable book, the new Woodward and Bernstein, every bit as readable as that first Schlesinger attempt at telling history as an exciting story rather than as a dry and dusty compilation of sequential events.

The difference is in the footnotes. I love to read history. But I like to think that what I read is factual, provable and that when the author says, "The king broke down and wept," someone who was there saw it happen.