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Book on Nixon's Last Months in Office Stirs a Furor Over Methods, Accuracy

By DEIRDRE CARMODY

"The Final Days," the new book by Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein about President Nixon's last eight months in the White House, is generating questions from journalists and historians about its methods of reporting history, denials from some of those named in the book about actions or remarks attributed to them and a spirited defense from the authors.

The book is essentially a fast-paced narrative. It details numerous private scenes involving President Nixon, members of his staff and his family and other who took part in the increasingly tense period that led to his resignation in August 1974. Excerpts from the book have appeared in Newsweek.

What is raising questions is the fact that the book is written in a fiction-like style with no footnotes and relatively little attribution. It is sprinkled with direct quotations, and there are several descriptions of what people were thinking during critical moments.

How were the authors able to reproduce verbatim quotes from conversations they had not heard? How did they know what the characters in their drama were thinking? And, since they do not trace the sources of this information, why should the reader believe them?

Need for Anonymity

Mr. Woodward and Mr. Bernstein, who also wrote "All the President's Men," in which they detailed their reporting of the Watergate scandals for The Washington Post, say it would have been impossible to write the new book without offering complete anonymity to everyone interviewed.

"Some people were willing to talk on the record, but we thought we would rather do it 'background,'" Mr. Woodward said, adding that he and Mr. Bernstein thought this "would be less self-serving" for those quoted.

"Obviously, we relied on primary sources wherever possible. Sometimes we used accounts that other people gave us, which they had heard from the principals, but we would only use them if we had double, triple and quadruple checked them.

"In cases where there were just two people in a room, we had to have something that had been recorded immediately afterward—somebody having taken notes or having told someone directly."

The authors say they interviewed 394 people, some of them several times. Mr. Woodward says that one principal was interviewed 17 times. The authors also had access to notes, diaries, transcripts of conversations, White House logs, official documents, hearing testimony, memorandums and correspondence. They insist that they included nothing in the book unless they were absolutely convinced of its accuracy.

'Interest in Truth'

"The truly important thing to consider here is the interest in the truth," says Mr. Bernstein. "Had we written a sourced, foot-noted account—saying that the interview took place at such and such a time on such and such a date—the information itself then indeed would be suspect. Then it would be self-serving. When people are put in the position of explaining their actions publicly, they have to consider a lot of things that make candor impossible.

"For instance, more traditional history leans heavily on diaries. I think that diaries are expurgated by their authors, and memoirs are similarly composed with the idea that 'somebody is going to write something about this.'

"I think the method we used makes the truth more obtainable," Mr. Bernstein said, "because it is not history based on the views of the participant as they sketched it for history."

Both authors make the point that many of the quotations were taken from transcripts of meetings, notes taken by participants in meetings and from testimony to which they listened, so that their record is, in effect, verbatim. The style of the book—a loose-running narrative—precluded the use of footnotes and cumbersome attribution, the authors say.

Question Raised Repeatedly

The question of quotations and attribution has been raised repeatedly over the years by historians and editors. Most newspapers insist that quotations be used only if the reporter actually heard them, and most historians will use quotations only if they can show exactly where the material came from.

One of the passages in the book that has caused much comment is the description of President Nixon and Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger alone in the Lincoln Sitting Room in the White House two nights before Mr. Nixon resigned. The President breaks down and sobs, according to the account, and then says to Mr. Kissinger:

"Henry, you are not a very orthodox Jew, and I am not an orthodox Quaker, but we need to pray."

Mr. Nixon was not interviewed for the book. Mr. Kissinger has said that he met with the authors, but was not a source for the book. Consequently, the accuracy of the account and of that particular quotation have been questioned.

"If that kind of direct quote appeared in The Wall Street Journal, the reporter would have had to have heard it said," remarked Frederick Taylor, the Journal's managing editor.

Newspaper Use

Would a responsible newspaper use the account if it could not tell the reader where the details had, come from?

"I don't know," said Benjamin C. Bradlee, executive editor of The Washington Post and the authors' boss. "If you can convince me of your bona fides, maybe. It depends on what you tell me."

The authors will not talk about their sources, but Mr. Bradlee makes the point that "if the President of the United States had come sobbing into your arms, you'd probably tell anyone you could find about it for the next hour or so," indicating his belief that there were probably a number of people who received immediate first-hand accounts of the incident.

Editors and historians have also been troubled by authors' accounts of people's thoughts at specific times.

'Reading Minds'

"That's an old bugaboo of mine," says Evarts Graham, managing editor of The St. Louis Post Dispatch. "Don't try to read someone else's mind. You can say something happened after something, but don't say it happened because of it."

One of those particularly disturbed at having thoughts ascribed to him is David Eisenhower, who is married to Mr. Nixon's daughter Julie. He issued a statement yesterday "rejecting categorically the implication I saw or thought anything suggesting President Nixon was demented in the closing days of his Administration."

The book says, "For months, David had been 'waiting for Mr. Nixon to go bananas,' as he sometimes phrased it."

In an interview earlier this week, Mr. Eisenhower denied having said this. When informed of the denial, Mr. Bernstein said: "The fact is David expressed some fears to people, and we talked to those people."

500 Questions

The authors say that if they had any questions about particular incidents they went back and checked with the principals. They said that when they had finished writing the book, their two research assistants, Scott Armstrong and Al Kamen, went through it and drew up a list of 500 questions. All of these were then fully checked out, Mr. Bernstein says.

Edward F. Cox, who is married to Mr. Nixon's elder daughter, Tricia, does not agree with this assessment. He says he had a telephone conversation "with one of the authors of the book" in which he said that he would not be interviewed. During that conversation, he says, he made it "absolutely clear to them if they had any sensational or questionable material which they wished me to verify they could just get in touch with me."

Mr. Cox said that neither Mr. Woodward nor Mr. Bernstein had done so. Yesterday, Mr. Cox issued a denial concerning a direct quotation attributed to him in a telephone conversation with Senator Robert P. Griffin, Republican of Michigan. Mr. Cox is quoted having said: "The Presidents was up walking the halls last night, talking to pictures of former Presidents — giving speeches and talking to the pictures on the wall."

In his statement yesterday, Mr. Cox said, "At no time in the course of that conversa-

tion, or any other conversation at any time, did I make any of the notorious statements, including particularly the absurd accusation that President Nixon was talking to pictures in the halls of the White House."

A number of other denials have been issued by those mentioned in the book. Senator Hugh Scott, the Pennsylvania Republican, for instance, is described as sobbing as he stands alone with Vice President Ford and says, "You're all we've got now." Through a spokesman, Senator Scott issued a statement this week saying that he "did not sob."

Mr. Bernstein disagrees.

"Senator Scott himself wrote an account of that particular meeting in which he said he sobbed and at what point he sobbed," Mr. Bernstein contended. "That was our initial source, written by the Senator himself."

Another disclaimer has come from Gen. Alexander M. Haig Jr., who was chief of staff at the White House and is now Supreme Commander of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in Brussels. On Thursday, he sent a telegram to Mr. Nixon in San Clemente, which said, in part: "I do not have a copy of the book but want to reassure you that I have not contributed in any way to the book and am genuinely shocked by the excerpts I have seen thus far . . ."

'Diplomatic Denials'

Some of this reaction, Mr. Woodward says, is what he calls "diplomatic denials." "In two cases," he explained, "I have heard where people who talked to us are denying they talked to us. We know that. We understand that."

Mr. Bernstein said: "There were a fair number of people who said, 'Look, the only way I can talk to you is that when your book comes out, I am going to have to deny publicly that I ever spoke to you.'"

Some historians have pointed out that they must make use of whatever material they can obtain and verify. Both Joseph Lash and Frank Freidel, who have written biographies of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, said that people who left meetings with a President usually recorded their observations as soon as possible in conversation, letters or diaries.

Mr. Woodward contends that such records often tell more about what really happened than the bound Presidential volumes, to which scholars usually obtain access years later and which describe events only in the way the Administration wishes to have them described.

Personal Details

One of the most ticklish questions in journalism and in historical writing is that of privacy, of when the intimate details of a public person's private life become relevant. "The Final Days" says that both Mr. and Mrs. Nixon took to drinking heavily. It also quotes Mrs. Nixon as having told a White House physician that she and Mr. Nixon "had not been really close since the early 1960's." It says that this "had seemed to shut something off" inside the President.

"What is in the book are things that are true and relevant," said Mr. Bernstein. "This is a book about a President, his family and the White House in perhaps the most extraordinary constitutional crisis in the nation's history. His family played a very large part, and you need to know all the pressures on him to be able to understand all that happened."