

The Furor Over The Book

The publication of "The Final Days," the chronicle of the fall of Richard Nixon by Washington Post reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, provoked an intense political and journalistic controversy last week. A number of critics—some of them principals in the narrative—attacked the taste, accuracy and methodology of the 175,000-word book, excerpts from which have appeared in the past two issues of NEWSWEEK. The authors defended their work on every count.

Even before it began reaching bookstores last week, "The Final Days" generated more media excitement than any

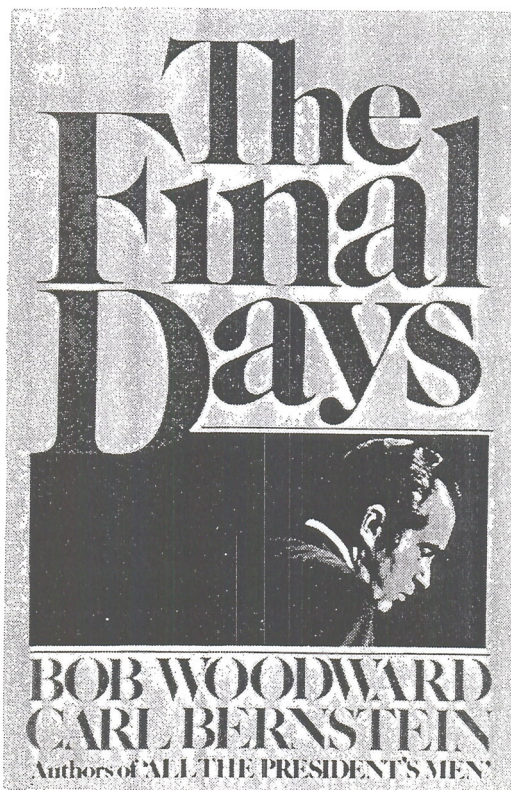
tentially suicidal and dangerously unstrung. Mrs. Ford guessed that the work would be "considered fictional." Former Watergate special prosecutor Archibald Cox said the sources for the book and its publishers "should be ashamed of themselves" for exploiting Nixon's psychic deterioration. William Safire, the New York Times columnist and former Nixon speechwriter, charged the authors with having ridiculed the ex-President—particularly in a scene in which he knelt, prayed and wept with Henry Kissinger. "How square," wrote Safire. "How cloyingly pious. How insufferably un-Georgetown."

Several leading players in the drama attacked the accuracy of the book or otherwise disassociated themselves from it. Kissinger said it was full of unspecified "inaccuracies, distortions and misrepresentations," and reflected "an indecent lack of compassion" for Nixon. Former White House chief of staff Alexander Haig, whose role in and thoughts about the last days are threaded through the work, cabled Nixon: "[I] want to reassure you that I have not contributed in any way to the book and am genuinely shocked by the excerpts."

Challenge: Both of Nixon's sons-in-law issued formal statements challenging passages in the book quoting them as having felt deep concern over Nixon's mental state. Edward Cox, Tricia Nixon's husband, denied one of the most provocative statements in the work—that he told U.S. Sen. Robert Griffin that Nixon had been "talking to the pictures" in the White House. Cox called that story "absurd," and said he had declined to be interviewed for the book. He had, he went on, offered to discuss "any sensational or questionable material" with the authors, but they had never done so.

Julie Nixon's husband, David Eisenhower, made a series of statements during the week. After the first wave of news stories, he was quoted by The New York Daily News as saying that the material he had seen so far seemed "by and large . . . accurate, I think." At the weekend, however, he too issued a written statement denying that he had ever said or thought that Nixon might "go bananas"—a concern attributed to him by Woodward and Bernstein. "For my part," Eisenhower said, "'The Final Days' is too single-minded in trying to document its themes of misplaced faith and insanity. It accepts rumors and assertions too literally and too uncritically, lending an impression which is unfair. It therefore should be read skeptically."

The most common journalistic com-



Book flap: The authors met the critics

book since William Manchester's embattled 1967 reconstruction of the death of John F. Kennedy. Fragmentary highlights appeared in Time magazine and The New York Daily News before NEWSWEEK published the first of its two 15,000-word installments last week. The issue was the fastest seller in NEWSWEEK's history, and the excerpts prompted an outpouring of news stories and commentaries. Some of the news accounts focused on the most sensational passages in the book, and some of the ensuing commentaries accused Woodward and Bernstein of invading the privacy of the Nixons for the sake of gossip and personal gain.

A number of public figures joined in the criticism. President Ford called the book "unfair and untimely," and disputed its characterization of Nixon as po-

plaint, aside from the question of taste, was the style of the book. Its form is omniscient narrative; it is written largely without attributions, and is studded with direct quotations from private conversations and with characterizations of the thoughts and emotions of the participants. Some readers questioned how the authors could have reconstructed the Nixon-Kissinger prayer scene in such intimate detail if neither of the two participants cooperated with them.

Defense: Woodward and Bernstein defended their work on every ground. "The fact is," said Bernstein, "that the principals described in this book, the sources of information for this book, and those who are making comments about this book all know the accuracy of this account. We stand behind every word of it." Both men considered its intimacy of detail central to its purpose. "This is no laundered version of history," said

nymity made the best opportunity to get the truth," said Woodward. The method, as the authors realized, had its drawbacks: they could not use conventional attributions or footnotes to indicate their sources, and they opened themselves to the risk that sources who had privately cooperated would publicly deny it. Some sources warned the authors in advance that they would disown any hand in the book. But, said Bernstein, "we have the memos and verbatim notes of our interviews—all of which speak for the integrity and accuracy of the book."

Scenes: Most reconstructed scenes in the book, according to the authors, were based on direct—and corroborated—accounts of one or more participants. In those few cases where no one would be interviewed, they said, they relied on sources in whom the participants had confided immediately after the

Woodward, "and we drew many of them. But it is impossible to keep out of this narrative the emotional realities that affected the decision-making process in the White House." One of those realities, the authors said, was the state of Nixon's family life; another was Nixon's own psyche. "In contrast to what's usually been written about Presidents," Bernstein said, "we had information from numerous sources about his loneliness—the distance he felt from people. Without an understanding of that loneliness, we felt it was impossible to understand this extraordinary historic event."

The controversy was itself a reflection of the emotional force of the book and the



Susan T. McElhinney—Newsweek

Woodward and Bernstein: 'The book will stand the test of time'

Woodward. "It includes material that is normally locked up for 50 years before being made public. It is an accurate account and will stand the test of time."

The authors have said that they interviewed 394 sources and had access as well to contemporaneous notes, memos, diaries, logs, files and other documents. They said they required at least two sources for every statement of fact, and often had many more. "Anything in the book has been checked and rechecked," Woodward said. "The more sensitive the material, the higher the standard we applied. There are several things being disputed now that we have as many as six sources for." Even after they had finished a draft, the authors said, they made a detailed chart listing the participants in every scene and the cross-checking that still needed to be done to meet their standards of proof.

Their basic technique was to allow all sources to speak without attribution. "We were convinced from covering the Watergate story that a guarantee of ano-

episode. They said they described a person's thoughts only on the principal's own word, backed up by what he told others at the time. Lengthy quotations came only from tape recordings or contemporary documents, the authors said, and short quotes were used only with multiple sourcing. "As for some statements people have made that they have never said things," Bernstein said, "in each of those instances we have confirmation of their actual statements by those to whom they spoke at the time—or in some cases from themselves."

The most heated criticism involved the issue of privacy—the revelations about Nixon's drinking habits, his marital relations, his emotional unraveling and other intimate material. Some critics questioned whether the book had not breached the outer boundaries of taste. "There *are* lines to be drawn," answered



Haig: 'I have not contributed in any way'



AP photos

The Eisenhowers: 'It should be read skeptically'

events it describes, and the furor about it is likely to go on for some time. "We knew some readers would find parts of the book profoundly disturbing—and they have," said NEWSWEEK's Editor Edward Kosner. "But we felt that the book was a compelling work of journalism about the greatest political story of our time, and we remain satisfied that it is an accurate and responsible piece of reportage."