

All the President's Agony

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THE FINAL DAYS. By Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein. 476 pages. Illustrated. Simon & Schuster. \$10.95.

Perhaps the most astonishing thing about reading the entire text of "The Final Days"—Bob Woodward's and Carl Bernstein's detailed account of the last 15 months of Richard M. Nixon's Presidency—is that all the sensational revelations that have been released in the last fortnight don't really seem terribly important. The gossip about the Nixons' drinking and sexual alienation, the fears expressed that the President might lose his grip and commit suicide, the expressions of hostility by members of his Administration—perhaps because the shock of their impact has already worn off, these lurid details seem dim when viewed against the background of the drama Mr. Woodward and Mr. Bernstein are unfolding.

As a matter of fact, in context such revelations seem different in quality as well as importance. For instance, one feels that the fears about Mr. Nixon's stability allegedly expressed by his sons-in-law, Edward F. Cox and David Eisenhower, were more expressions of their personal anxieties in the final days of Watergate than an accurate reflection of Mr. Nixon's mental state. For instance, Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger's reported remarks about Mr. Nixon's paranoia, anti-Semitism and lack of intellect seem more the manifestation of tense emotional outbursts than of deeply held convictions or feelings that amounted to anything.

Courage and Dignity

And for instance, contrary to some observers' impressions, at no point is it implied by anyone, including Mr. Woodward and Mr. Bernstein, that the already famous prayer-session-with-tears in the Lincoln Sitting Room was the act of a man losing his sanity. So Mr. Nixon himself—far from seeming an unstable figure on the verge of "going bananas," as David Eisenhower is supposed to have feared he might be—emerges from the book as a tragic figure weathering a catastrophic ordeal (of his own making, to be sure, but that is the nature of truly tragic ordeals), and weathering it with considerable courage and dignity.

What matters about this extraordinary work of reposure is not so much the headlines it has already made, but rather the news it brings of both a more general and particular nature. What matters while actually reading it is the sense it conveys of what it was like to be working close to Mr. Nixon in those tense days—working as close as the White House chief of staff, Alexander M. Haig Jr., or the press secretary, Ron Ziegler, or the special counsels, J. Fred Buzhardt and James D. St. Clair, were working—and never having much idea of what was going on in the President's head. (Former Defense Secretary Melvin R. Laird "had told Buzhardt that he always had the feeling the President didn't want any one person to have the full picture," the authors report near the beginning. They then proceed to make overwhelmingly clear the truth of Mr. Laird's observation.)

And what matters almost as much as the sensational revelations is the wealth of tinier details and nuances: General Haig's reported suspicion that "The President

himself had erased the 18½ minutes" of the June 20, 1972, conversation with H. R. Haldeman; or the scene in which Mr. Nixon bids farewell to his private barber, Milton Pitts; or a vignette describing Mr. Nixon's lack of mechanical ability, in which a Presidential aide, Stephen Bull, recounts having once been asked by the President to open an allergy-pill bottle with teeth marks on its childproof cap where Mr. Nixon had apparently tried to gnaw it open.

But can we believe "The Final Days"? Are Messrs. Woodward and Bernstein finally credible? All that can be reported here is that the experience of reading the book is credible—that is, the book is artistically believable. After all, as extraordinarily fresh as the whole thing seems, what's new about it consists of comparatively minute details; the framework in which these details are presented we've always known to be true, and we've read about at least a dozen times before. And the details at least seem plausible: it is always reasonably clear from the text who their possible sources could have been; and they always read as if they had been reconstructed from a secondhand point of view. (The criticism that has been voiced that the authors go too far in reproducing people's thoughts cuts very little ice: it is one thing to represent the *process* of thinking, as certain so-called new journalists are wont to do; it is something else entirely to summarize past thoughts, as Mr. Woodward and Mr. Bernstein consistently do.) Of course, to trust "The Final Days" one must read it with a predisposition to believe; yet not to do so is to put oneself in the curious position of doubting the very reporters who broke the Watergate story in the first place.

As for the total impact of the book, it seems remarkably sympathetic to Richard Nixon. At least this reader was moved by the former President's travail as he was never moved before. How can the book possibly have this effect on someone who sat through Mr. Nixon's televised farewell to his staff on the morning of Friday, Aug. 9, 1974, not only dry-eyed but also muttering curses at the ex-President's mawkishness?

One Thing Was Clear

A clue to the answer may lie in Mr. Buzhardt's account of listening to the Dictabelts that Mr. Nixon sometimes recorded at the end of the day as a form of "therapy." "The lawyer would not reveal any details, even to General Haig. He would say only that Mr. Nixon had talked at length of his real feelings and, oddly, he would discourse on everyday occurrences—the weather, the flowers in the White House Garden, birds. One thing was clear, Mr. Buzhardt said: the President thought he had to submerge his true feelings at any cost. At a young age he had decided that he would have to keep his real emotions suppressed and expose only calculated emotions. He was convinced that it was what others wanted."

Yes, and it was part of what was so infuriating about Mr. Nixon—that refusal to give anything more than the calculated persona. Well, one effect of "The Final Days" is to get us behind the persona. And Days" is to get us behind the persona. And long-overdue catharsis as well.