

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

WXPost

APR 8 1976

The Final Days: 'Obscene' . . . 'Sensation Seeking' . . .

To bare a fellow human being's weakness and humiliation as you did Richard Nixon is obscenity in its purest form. I think Nixon deserved to be impeached, had he not resigned; he was morally corrupt and brought disgrace upon himself. But no one deserves what has been done to him in "The Final Days." And for you to excerpt it on your front page only gives fuel to critics of journalism who say Nixon was hounded out of office by the press. You have lowered yourself to his level.

DORIS BROUGHTON

Arlington

As we Americans have seen in the past few months and years, organizations as well as individuals are only too often puffed up and drunk on their own power. Newspapers and journalists are certainly not immune, from this sickness. When I read on the first page of "Aftenposten" in Oslo about "De Siste Dager" by Woodward and Bernstein, I was shocked at the appalling bad taste, callousness, and materialism with which these two set about exposing a still-living individual and his family to the morbid curiosity of their readers. I cannot believe for one minute that a devotion to truth is their motive. Honorable people in possession of truth are also in possession of taste, mercy, and dignity. I would never consider feeding the bank account of these two by feeding on the private details of others' private lives, ex-President or no. The trials are finished. What a pity that The Washington Post and this new book are reduced to the baseness of scandal sheets.

CHERRI LOPER DOHLEN

Oslo, Norway

One would think that Washington, D.C., and the entire United States are sick of the Watergate incidents and all the rehashed circumstances surrounding it. Your front page of March 27, 1976, "(Watergate Revisted") and the introduction of Woodward and Bernstein's book only regurgitates the garbage and swallows it all over again.

Why not dump the whole subject! I am sure you must have interest in other more real and important issues. I, for one, can not see the sense of beating a dead horse other than the egotistical pleasure of just doing to do it.

THOMAS J. NEVIASER

Washington

As an area law student, it is difficult for me to consider the apparently deep and catalytic involvement of the Nixon administration in the Watergate scandal as other than clearly illegal and morally derelict; in that regard, Messrs. Woodward and Bernstein, and The Post, have well served both the public and their profession. Nonetheless, I believe that The Post's front-page coverage (March 27) of Woodward and Bernstein's speculative and sensational depiction of the end of that administration is a discredit to responsible journalists and an insult to serious readers. Haynes Johnson's prefatory apologia merely compounds the disservice; in its best light, Johnson's article exhibits candor in its concession that the authors "employ the techniques of a novelist." This type of writing is better left to the likes of Irving Wallace and the Reader's Digest than to such heretofore credible jour-

nalists as Woodward and Bernstein. The Post's hype of a publication of two of its employees would better have been relegated to the pages of People magazine.

My comment applies equally to Newsweek magazine, which operates under the same ownership as The Post and carries a similar account in this week's cover story. Both publications are likely to disappoint their readers with such coverage.

BRUCE E. AITKEN

Washington

I hope the new book about Richard Nixon, which Woodward and Bernstein have just written, has the reverse effect on many readers, just as it has on me.

When is enough, enough?

EDITH TAYLOR

Akron, Ohio

. . . Or a Challenge to the Authors?

Tom Braden's article, "What Is History?" hints at, though it does not fully explore, the central question behind any intelligent discussion of "The Final Days," by Woodward and Bernstein.

Unfortunately, your letters to the editor in the April 3 issue miss this crucial point. History is often required to record events which seem to lack compassion, mercy, or human decency. The fact that the events of Watergate and its aftermath are ugly should not allow them to escape the careful scrutiny of the human mind.

Woodward and Bernstein are already marching heavily upon ground on which many historians must surely fear to tread—at least this soon after the event. Yet the authors must employ many of the techniques which are the stock-in-trade of working historians and journalists—selection, order, and interpretation. Because they are newspapermen and their sources must remain anonymous for now, Mr. Braden's reassuring footnotes are necessarily absent.

But footnotes do not by themselves make good or accurate history. Historians do, by careful and critical application of their minds and their pens. The narrative of "The Final Days"

seems to be filled with "loaded" words—words which convey an opinion, an emotion, or a value judgment. Historians must use these terms, but they must use them very carefully. Only time and continued investigation by critical and open minds will reveal the accuracy of Woodward and Bernstein's observations and evaluations. All historians must interpret and evaluate raw data, of whatever type it may be, and from it develop a readable narrative which gives as truthful an account as is possible. G. M. Trevelyan, the famous English historian, reminds us that "the art of history remains always the art of narrative."

Historical truth is never absolute. Those who expect it will always be disappointed. Historians and journalists strive toward accuracy; only their data and their skill can determine success or failure. As readers, we must always view their judgments with a critical and enquiring mind. This is our best and only defense against inaccuracy or intentional deception. In the years to come, Woodward and Bernstein must face this challenge. How their pronouncements are received depends on us, and so they should.

GORDON BERG

Washington

When The Post originally went after Nixon in uncovering the Watergate scandal I questioned whether the amount of notoriety was commensurate with the nature of the deed, but I told myself that it was all in the name of freedom of the press.

However, you have gone too far this time! In printing the extract from the book "The Final Days" on the front page of your March 27 edition you not only showed a complete lack of humanity, but you put your newspaper in the same category with the other cheap, sensation seeking scandal sheets that make one ashamed of the journalism profession.

PHYLLIS M. HAYES

Fairfax

The exposure of the private agonies of Mr. Nixon in the final days of his presidency is not only in very poor taste but is a sad commentary on the ease with which a human being can be converted into a profitable industry by the greed of a few and the perverse appetites of so many.

Also at issue are the professional ethics of a newspaper that affords front-page publicity to a commercial product of doubtful veracity written by two members of its own reporting staff (March 27th issue).

The lonely eremite of San Clemente and the commercialized myth that is Nixon are worlds apart now. What purpose is served by repeatedly kicking a fallen hero or continually demonstrating that the idol has feet of clay? Perhaps the endless parade of one corrupt Republican will not, in the end, persuade voters that all Democrats are therefore honest.

HAROLD C. CANNON

Annandale

Karl Jaspers, in his book on "The Future of Mankind" under the constant threat of the now-possible world destruction through the atomic bomb, wrote concerning political leaders: "In the past, folly and wickedness had limited consequences; today they draw all mankind to perdition". The new situation demands that we select our political leaders with infinitely greater scrutiny. If we continue to submit to "mere politicians" who seek and relish power as such, we are doomed. We must search for "real statesmen" who need "the ethical illumination that is our premise for the survival of mankind". Jaspers postulates that whoever seeks and assumes high public office must be forever critically probed and examined in his public as in his private activity. "His life must be an open book, because it is the concern of all". He must be willing, even eager, to let this happen.

When Nixon was elected, his sorry public record was forgotten, and the knowledge accumulated by the social sciences about persons of his kind, the authoritarian character, the demagogue, the would-be dictator, was ignored by the electorate. In order to prevent repetitions, we need every scrap of information, available to everybody, as to how a man like Nixon functions; and we must abandon radically the blind veneration for the holder of the highest office.

Woodward and Bernstein deserve gratitude for their relentless research in pursuit of exactly the task Jaspers delineated. The Post published only letters criticizing them—foolishly in my view. Yet their book is not, as the critics would have it, tattle and gossip.

They show in necessary detail how the nation and the world were imperiled when the President ceased to govern but continued to claim the governing position. They demonstrate how Nixon was the same in his fall as he was in all his political life. And they do not spare us the final drowning in self-pity and alcohol, understandable for the "mere politician" but unacceptable in the "real statesman" who faces and assumes responsibility to the end.

I hope Woodward's and Bernstein's effort will shake up and rally all citizens to their duty: to be forever vigilant as to whom they entrust their fate; to never let up in their demand that the leader be accountable to the last moment of his service, and that he not dodge or evade the consequences of his actions.

ERICH HEYDT

Washington

The Washington Post

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