

'The Final Days'

AS VIEWED BY
Ben H. Bagdikian

BY NOW, everyone who cares about the presidency and about the presidency of Richard Nixon in particular has read long excerpts from the new Woodward and Bernstein book, "The Final Days," and maybe the book itself.

What remains is a running controversy over the kind of journalism practiced by the authors, a controversy over credibility for such detailed and shocking episodes from unattributed sources, the usefulness of this kind of instant history, and the propriety of delving into the private lives of public officials.

Instant history and invasion of privacy are legitimate concerns. But there is no need even to consider these in "The Final Days" if the book is inherently unbelievable.

How are we to judge the accuracy of a 476-page book of detailed verbatim conversations, of private emotions and secluded behavior inside a beleaguered and paranoid White House? Where does the lack of attribution and documentation leave the reader?

Unattributed stories are not unusual in journalism, including some very good journalism. Some of Woodward and Bernstein's critics themselves regularly write important stories on the basis of unnamed

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sources. It is impossible to report national securities affairs in a way useful for the voter without using unnamed sources.

The questions to be asked in unattributed stories are

- is the story important enough to omit the usual obligation to tell the reader where it comes from;
- is there enough internal evidence in the story to permit reasonable judgment on its plausibility; and
- what is the reputation of the journalist whose honesty and judgment we are being asked to accept?

Though some dismiss the importance of the subject in the book, it seems self-evident to me that the character and behavior of a president of the United States during a period of national crisis in which he is the problem are important.

Internal evidence of plausibility of the accounts, though bizarre accounts, is plentiful.

As for the care and judgment in using unattributed information, the authors provide some background in their Foreword. They acknowledge the help of two major collaborators, Scott Armstrong, a former investigator for the Senate Watergate Committee, and Al Kamen, a free-lance writer-researcher (which may account for the strikingly different writing style in "Final Days" compared with "All The President's Men"). They say they interviewed 394 people, many of whom supplied correspondence, logs, calendars and

memoranda made at the time of events. They say they used the now-famous two-source rule employed in Watergate.

All of this talent and activity could be true and the authors still be liars, axe-grinders, or venial fictionalizers. After all, the White House also had highly paid talent with enormous resources to turn out orchestrated lies. The same could be true of a well-heeled enterprise like Woodward and Bernstein.

But highly researched lies by others do not have as their credentials the expose of Watergate, as do Woodward and Bernstein. On form alone, it seems to me, there is justification to approach "The Final Days" with an assumption that the authors understand solid research and would hesitate to squander their international reputation with a quick and dirty second work.

This comes to mind with the many portions of the book when the reader is likely to ask, "How the hell do they know that?" There are descriptions like, "Garment felt the heat increase in his body . . ." And " 'Dean's a smart little bastard,' St. Clair said to himself . . ." And, "Goldwater could feel tears in his eyes . . ." So the answer has to be Garment, St. Clair and Goldwater as sources.

But what about scenes like the famous one of Nixon and Kissinger on their knees praying and Nixon pounding the rug in sobbing frustration? Nixon refused to talk to the

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authors. Could Kissinger, with all his egomania, risk telling them this story when the finger would point right to this man who depends on intimate relations with his client-bosses? But the authors continue that episode with Kissinger fleeing distraught to his own office where he immediately unloads the whole scene to his assistants, Lawrence Eagleburger and Lt. Gen. Brent Scowcroft. So if not Kissinger, it could be Eagleburger and/or Scowcroft.

People who deal with famous men, especially with presidents, often feel that they are undergoing a historical experience and tell their intimates about it, and often everyone in earshot. Washington is filled with former special assistants, counsels and office boys to Franklin Roosevelt who to this day can recount in minute detail verbatim conversations and settings of scenes, burned into their memories and memoranda.

Some doubt has been expressed over the ability of anyone to interview as many as 394 persons. Extensive research often means exactly that magnitude of interviewing. Besides, the authors acknowledge that two major collaborators worked with them for over a year. If they worked only 60 hours a week each (a small workweek for writers on a demanding job), this means a total of 240 man-hours of work available a week, or over 12,000 man-hours of work available for a year. If only 10 per cent of this resource — probably much too small an estimate — were devoted to interviews, it would mean 1,200 hours for interviewing. Mathematically and journalistically, this is easily achievable.

Accuracy of some episodes has been denied by some principals in the story. But these denials shift in some cases. David Eisenhower at times seems to be saying he never talked to the authors, at other times admitting that he did. Perhaps the

most direct denial came from Edward Cox, another son-in-law of the Nixons, who denied the story in “Final Days” that he telephoned Sen. Robert Griffin to describe a White House in chaos and the President talking with portraits of past presidents. When Senator Griffin was asked to respond to Cox’s denial, the senator declined to comment. At the very least it leaves only one party to a two-party conversation denying what was said.

It isn’t hard to triangulate characters in the book and come out with a hunch of who the source was for each episode.

It might be well to put the lack of attribution in the context of other books that, somehow, escape impassioned denunciation. In the thanks he gives in his Acknowledgment of his “Making of the President, 1964,” Theodore White writes:

“It is more difficult to thank the men of government and politics. Their most truthful reflections are generally offered only in privacy, and their interests are best served if I offer my thanks to them privately.”

No uproar there.

There is a danger that other reporters and less meticulous persons will be encouraged to write unsourced stories without the discipline and research of Woodward and Bernstein. But that does not cancel the credentials of Woodward and Bernstein or the legitimacy of this kind of work when it is performed with competence and care.

I, for one, assume that “Final Days” is as correct as careful research could make it.

Instant History: An Appraisal

But is it worth it? What is the value of instant history? Is this a bastardization of cool historical procedures conducted with meticulous sourcing and documentation after passions and personalities have faded?

There is considerable romanticism about the objectivity of cool historical research. Historians are at least as vulnerable to chauvinism as journalists and regularly disagree with each other on the basis of the same documentation.

By itself this does not make instant history good or better. Since events are so recent and the people involved still raw, the actors are tempted to issue self-serving versions that absolve themselves of blame, or cover themselves with glory, or pay off old scores with enemies. When there is a disaster, few will come forward and say for the record, or off it, that it was their fault.

There are some safeguards, however. Subject A quotes himself and his version of what was paid by B and C. You interview B who may or may not do the same thing for himself. And then C. This is what the authors said they did, and it is done regularly by good reporters.

But this still leaves loose ends. How do you decide whether A, or B, or C are reliable, and how do you weigh their relative accuracy? There is no reason to believe that Woodward and Bernstein are philosopher kings about human personality, and they could make serious mistakes about personalities. But they know a lot more about the details and personalities in Watergate than most people; and, whatever talents they may or may not have in measuring the human personality, they have a solid basis for judging plausible detail in this particular historical event.

Furthermore, instant history has some advantages. As time passes, history depends more and more on documentation. And in historiography there is increasing skepticism about the adequacy of official documents. When President Kennedy was shocked at the drastic political consequences of what seemed to be a technical decision, to withhold the Skybolt weapons system from the

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British, he commissioned a respected political scientist, Richard Neustadt, to find out what went wrong and how everyone could have misjudged the consequences. He gave Neustadt access to all files and all people. When he was through, Neustadt said that if he had depended solely on the documents, he would never have understood what happened. Only face-to-face conversation with actors in the event shortly after it happened gave him the knowledge and insight into the reality of those decisions.

Instant history, with all its disadvantages, if written with discipline and without pretensions, is a valuable contribution.

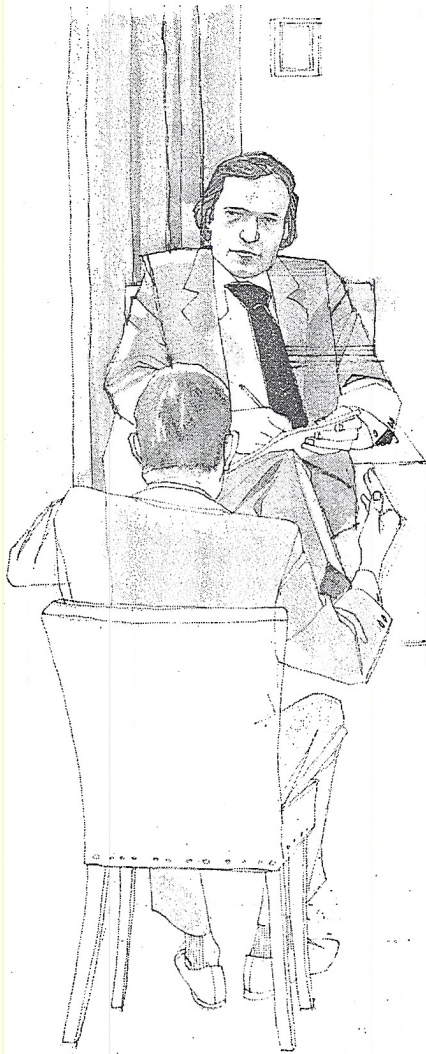
The Nixons' Private Life

Invasion of privacy plagues all journalism and society as a whole. Much of it is exploitative, like the dozens of magazines and weeklies with endless nonsense about Jackie Kennedy and Elizabeth Taylor. Books about famous people come from their valets, secretaries and dog trainers. Spiro Agnew and John Ehrlichman are not best known for their literary creativity, but they have big novels about “the White House.” The First Amendment protects them all, as it should (and as Ehrlichman once denied in my presence).

But the legal right to publish without prior restraint does not relieve the writer from the ethical responsibility of writing as truthfully as possible. In public affairs there is the burden of assuming that there is some redeeming social value. Where is the line in describing the private lives of public persons as prurient exploitation and as redeeming social value?

There is a simple rule many journalists follow: a public figure's private life is his or her own until it affects public affairs.

It's a good rule, though it is often difficult to apply. For years there have been drunks in Congress or



satyrs who missed crucial debates, votes on the floor and their committee hearings because they were semi-comatose with liquor or rolling in the bedsheets with their latest groupie. Procurement officials in government are the subject of jokes because some of them have at their service young women supplied by the corporation “Washington representatives” to whom these officials regularly give government contracts. That is legitimate public concern with private behavior.

When misbehavior and unreliable activity in office are a reflection of personality defects, then the problem is more difficult but the responsibility for journalistic judgment just

as real. The difficulty is that understanding severe personality problems that interfere with official duty — as they did with Nixon, certainly in the final days — involves knowing something of character, psyche and personal relations, including with one's own family. The fact that the President and Mrs. Nixon did not have intimate relations is, it seems to me, a relevant matter in understanding the withdrawn character of Richard Nixon. In the telling, Woodward and Bernstein are restrained and unprurient. I don't know, but I am willing to bet that they knew for certain much more than they wrote about Richard Nixon's intimate life.

There is another reason why disclosure of personal activities as they affect public performance is important. There is a dangerous stereotype in the United States of the politician as Boy Scout. Most of us know that this is nonsense. Neither public officials nor any other human groups are unrelievedly trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean and reverent — nor can they become so by the mere fact they are elected to office. We all know better; but there is a convention in this country to want to believe it.

Evidence of the folly of this stereotype makes jarring wrecks on the political landscape. William McKinley and Warren Harding did not become wise men on election to office. The idea of the scoundrel reaching the top and then turning his energies to good government has little to justify it. Spiro Agnew kept taking bribes in envelopes in the office of Vice President of the United States, and Richard Nixon's history hardly needs mention as evidence against the notion that achieving maximum power automatically produces stability, probity and selflessness.

Politicians feed this public stereotype through the most widespread use of their public relations — ex-

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exploitation of television. Such exploitation is the most refined of the black arts of the White House, choreographing every public second of every president more precisely than any *pas de deux* in Swan Lake. This false front makes it impossible for people to vote intelligently and gives only subliminal clues to the future acts of the people they elect to power.

Our Vulnerability

The problem of Richard Nixon in the lives of Americans comes down to the ideology and the character of Richard Nixon. This was true in 1946 and it was true in 1972. He was always a man of sufficient intellect to cope with complex problems; but he was flawed by resentment toward most of the world, an obsession with martyrdom and self-justification, and the need for perpetual reassurance of his own power. His ability to fool people about the false front he showed in public and the one he had in private was not unique — many politicians do that as a major effort. But the disparity between his public and his private self was so profound that it produced a major trauma in American political history, and helped produce the closest we have come to an integrated secret police system at the command of a few arrogant men in the White House.

Richard Nixon spelled the end of the Age of Innocence in American political life. We are a great people, but as vulnerable to stupidity, greed and illusion as anyone else. Our leaders are not Boy Scouts or endowed with some automatic transmuter of personal dross to gold. Unless we understand better the social ideas and the personal characters of the people to whom we grant power, we are doomed to repeat Watergates and worse. The British have long accepted the reality that many of their famous men will be eccentric to the point of approaching certifiable nuttiness, and British

journalism reflects this. We still float with the hope that perhaps our men of power are automatically good-hearted and sound. They aren't. They are human, and some of them are weak and evil. Even when they are very good, they need watching. Secrecy in government has produced terrible things. Men and women of power, unwatched, can do terrible things.

So the fact that Richard Nixon's private life is partially disclosed in "The Final Days" is a contribution. And it is a warning. For Richard Nixon to have become stable, unselfish, wise and warm by election to the presidency would have taken a miracle. It is a desperate nation that votes for miracles. Yet, the elaborate public relations machinery led us to expect miracles, and journalism, overly concerned with judging candidates on the basis of shrewdness and strategic cleverness, didn't help us much.

The book is not without flaws, but they are minor. Events are reported whose completion would be useful. Nixon passed on his intimate friend Bebe Rebozo's plan for Vietnam to his foreign policy machinery. What was Rebozo's plan? You have the feeling that the authors must know but they don't tell. It would let us know what went on in Nixon's head in his most private moments. They cite the President's lawyer, James St. Clair, reading to the House Judiciary Committee what turns out later to be a false or misleading tape transcript from the White House (the date of the transcript was crucial, but it has the President referring to an event that had not yet happened as of the alleged date of the tape). Was this an honest error? Or another White House deception?

But, on the whole, the book tells us much of a White House closed to scrutiny and given too much power. We learn from the book things we should have known much earlier. Nixon lied not only to the

country for over a year but to his closest aides and lawyers, as well. We learn that for about a year the President of the United States, for all practical purposes, was an army general, Alexander Haig. We learn that our bank safety deposit boxes, supposedly sacrosanct, are not sacrosanct if the White House wants to peek inside.

Some of the criticism of the book seems to sprout from jealousy. Many mention that two young squirts are now millionaires. If the young millionaires did nothing, this would be legitimate criticism. But they did a great deal for their country. If they used their reputation to produce schlock at a profit, it would be worth saying so. "The Final Days" is not schlock. If they had become personally insufferable because of their wealth and fame, that would be regrettable but shouldn't affect judgment of their work (my impression is that they handle themselves much better than most politicians who suddenly achieve far less celebration).

From Some, Poor Grace

Former Nixonites, of course, can be expected to be bitter, though why they turn their anger on Woodward and Bernstein instead of on the boss who betrayed them is a mystery to me. William F. Buckley refers to Nixon merely as "an unsuccessful snoop with a finite curiosity about human weakness," a judgment that means that once again, alas, we have to dismiss Buckley as a clever wordsmith who ought to climb down from his highchair of public ethics. Patrick Buchanan, who orchestrated many of the Nixon lies and media manipulations, complains bitterly that at least Nixon did not collaborate, as did the authors and their paper, with Hollywood to make a movie, or time publicity to make more profits on their paperback. So far as we know, neither did Nixon poke the eyes out of stray cats. But he did lie, cheat and

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create an unconstitutional secret police apparatus. We would all be much better off if he had committed, instead, the “sin” Buchanan accuses Woodward and Bernstein of committing.

It is poor grace for the loyalists who were so willing to accept uncritically the deceptions that came from the White House, to express outrage at a couple of journalists who looked into the dangerous last days of a corrupt regime. Joseph Alsop, who spent a good deal of his time during his support of the Vietnam war criticizing his journalistic colleagues for lacking objectivity, is described in the book as summoning the swing Republican on the House Judiciary Committee, Tom Railsback, to the Alsop home to order him not to vote for impeachment.

What “The Final Days” tells us is that we are in desperate danger because we have a double standard. We do not expect, any longer, that our public officials will tell the truth, but we have a tendency to condemn the journalists who catch them lying.

Not all the critics of Woodward and Bernstein are disappointed Nixon lovers.

Archibald Cox, fired by Nixon as special prosecutor in Watergate, was quoted as saying:

“It’s not surprising any man would disintegrate under those circumstances, and I don’t see any gain in peddling those stories in books and news magazines.”

There is a great deal to be gained by “peddling those stories.” (Arnold Toynbee, Henry Steele Commager, and, indeed, Archibald Cox also have “peddled” books, not yet, we hope, a disreputable practice.) Nixon controlled the CIA and the FBI in his final as in his initial days, and we know what he did with the CIA and FBI when under pressure. He controlled the armed forces, and he mentioned a number of times to his subordinates during the final



Kenneth Stark

days that people had better remember that he controlled the nuclear button until a successor was sworn in. His associates expressed fear that he might, in fact, become so erratic and desperate as to cause a catastrophic act, and they felt there was enough in his emotional background to make it a possibility.

The 25th Amendment provides for temporary disability of the President. If it means anything then, the responsible persons under the Constitution must know when a President is becoming disabled or disoriented, and, in this case, they hardly knew before it was too late. If the White House has unlimited ability to maintain a false facade over a significant period of time, then we are all in trouble.

There are some who say that the authors probably did a reasonably accurate job but in all decency and responsibility they should have waited until history could take over, when the individuals who could be

hurt, especially innocent ones like Mrs. Nixon and the Nixon children, would be either dead or healed by passage of time. It is a civilized argument, but it raises a professional and a social problem.

The professional problem is self-censorship by a journalist when he has important information. It is an act of irresponsibility if a journalist, possessing information he knows to be true and significant, withholds it from the public. If it is to be withheld because some individuals will be pained, it is well to go through any newspaper and count the number of stories needed in public policy that would be censored because someone — the family of a guilty official, the children of an honest promoter of a failed policy — might be hurt.

The basic problem of waiting for the traditional historical process is that the advantages of time and care and perspective have countervailing disadvantages. Memories grow cold. Details fade. And the same intervening events that give perspective can also distort perceptions into being more orderly and consistent than they really were.

Perhaps the most important problem in dismissing “instant history” (which is another term for serious journalism) is that our social process moves with great speed. Decisions must be made without waiting for the maturation process of history. The United States today is still in political trauma and social turbulence. If we waited for years, it might be little help in preventing a recurrence. It would be kinder to the individuals involved to wait until they die, but it would be unkind to this and the next generation. Most principals in Watergate have a remaining life expectancy of 30 years. To know as precisely as possible how Watergate and a Nixonian police apparatus developed cannot wait for 30 years. That would be the year 2006 and the year 1984 arrives first. ■