

A Stoic Pat Nixon Is Recalled by Aide

By ROBERT B. SEMPLE, Jr.

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LONDON, Aug. 13—"The key point is that they never understood Washington, never figured out how to cultivate friends or negotiate with enemies. They simply couldn't reach out, and thus they built a fortress."

In these words, Helen McCain Smith summarized the other day her rather wistful thoughts of what was wrong with the Nixon Presidency and what ultimately led to its collapse.

Helen Smith served as Mrs. Nixon's press secretary in the last agonizing months of the Nixon Presidency. She is now living in relative obscurity as an information officer in the American Embassy here.

But she has found herself back in the news because of an article of which she is co-author in the July issue of Good Housekeeping magazine in order to "set straight the record" on Mrs. Nixon's behavior during the few months that preceded the President's resignation and return to California.

The impression left in Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward's second book, "The Final Days," was that Mrs. Nixon could not cope with the shattering denouement of her husband's tenure—that she took to drink, failed to perform official duties, and came close to divorcing Mr. Nixon.

Mrs. Smith says that none of this is true. Both in the article and in an interview here this week, she concedes that Mrs. Nixon was not aware of the scope of the scandal, preferred to believe that her husband had been misled by "unscrupulous advisers," and did not realize that her family would have to leave the White House until the President gathered them all together on Aug. 2, 1974, in the Lincoln Room and showed them a transcript of a decisively incriminatory tape of discussions in his office.

'A Stoical Figure'

But Mrs. Smith insisted that none of this affected Mrs. Nixon's personal behavior. While she smoked cigarettes and had an occasional drink "off duty," the crisis did not drive Mrs. Nixon to despair, nor did she hide from her ceremonial activities, Mrs. Smith says.

"As the pressure mounted she became even more conscientious than before about fulfilling the backbreaking schedule she set for herself," Mrs. Smith says in her article. She added the other day: "Pat was answering her mail until the very end. She was a stoical figure when times were good, when the dreariest burden in her life was to attend political rallies day after day. But she was no less courageous when things went bad."

Mrs. Smith says she does not know enough to comment on the "private life" of Mr. and Mrs. Nixon—what they told each other as the scandal deepened. But she clearly feels that the President's wife was never properly recognized or rewarded for her loyalty, in good years and bad, and that while she willingly succumbed to the demands of political life she was often hurt by them.

Mr. Nixon's behavior, she said, was carefully watched by the West Wing of the White House—presided over by H.R. Haldeman, Mr. Nixon's chief of staff, for whom Mrs. Smith has very little affection. In the Good Housekeeping article, Mrs. Smith recalled that rumors circulated throughout the White House that Mr. Haldeman felt that Mrs. Nixon was a "political liability" and that "the President would do well to dump her."

Mrs. Smith said that she never was able to confirm these rumors. But she did say that on occasion Mrs. Nixon and Mr. Haldeman violently disagreed on matters of taste if not politics.

On one occasion, Mrs. Smith says, Mr. Haldeman recommended the taping and marketing of a White House concert by Johnny Cash. Mrs. Nixon thought that the idea was exploitative, and successfully vetoed it. She also successfully complained about the flamboyant uniforms that Mr. Haldeman briefly imposed on the White House guards.

There were other points of difference, according to Mrs. Smith, between the First Lady and "the men in the West Wing"—Mrs. Nixon and staff were consigned to the East Wing, like other Presidential wives. Mrs. Nixon, for example, thought that White House staff members should circulate among ordinary Washingtonians. "But," says Mrs. Smith, "dinner parties were discouraged. We were not to mix with Democrats, Liberals, or reporters. This was regarded as frivolous activity. People who got too friendly with the opposition soon suffered."

Mrs. Smith's vision of Mrs. Nixon is that of a woman who accepted her role as a political wife but then found that victory did not bring any sense of freedom.