

Book Says Nixon Prayed, Wept on Eve of Departure

On the night before he announced his resignation as President, Richard Nixon retired alone to the Lincoln Sitting Room upstairs in the White House. Then he summoned Henry Kissinger, his Secretary of State. The following extract from the new book, "The Final Days," describes that scene.

By Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein

There was the President in his chair, as he had seen him so often. Kissinger reflected on the fact that he really didn't like the President. Nixon had made him the most admired man in the country, yet the secretary couldn't bring himself to like his patron. They sat for a time and reminisced about events, travels, shared decisions. The President was drinking. He said he was resigning. It would be better for everyone. They talked quietly—history, the resignation decision, foreign affairs.

Then Nixon said that he wasn't sure he would be able to resign. Could he be the first President to quit office?

Kissinger responded by listing the President's contributions, especially in diplomacy.

"Will history treat me more kindly than my contemporaries?" Nixon asked, tears flooding to his eyes.

Certainly, definitely, Kissinger said. When this was all over, the President would be remembered for the peace he had achieved.

The President broke down and sobbed.

Kissinger didn't know what to do. He felt cast in a fatherly role. He talked on, he picked up on the themes he had heard so many times from the President. He remembered lines about his enemies, the need to stand up to adversity, to face criticism forthrightly.

Between sobs, Nixon was plaintive. What had he done to the country and its people? He needed some explanation. How had it come to this? How had a simple burglary, a breaking and entering, done all this?

Kissinger kept talking, trying to turn the conversation back to all the good things, all the accomplishments. Nixon wouldn't hear of it. He was hysterical. "Henry," he said, "you are not a very orthodox Jew, and I am not an orthodox Quaker, but we need to pray."

Nixon got down on his knees. Kissinger felt he had no alternative but to kneel down, too. The President prayed out loud, asking for help, rest, peace and love. How could a President and a country be torn apart by such small things?

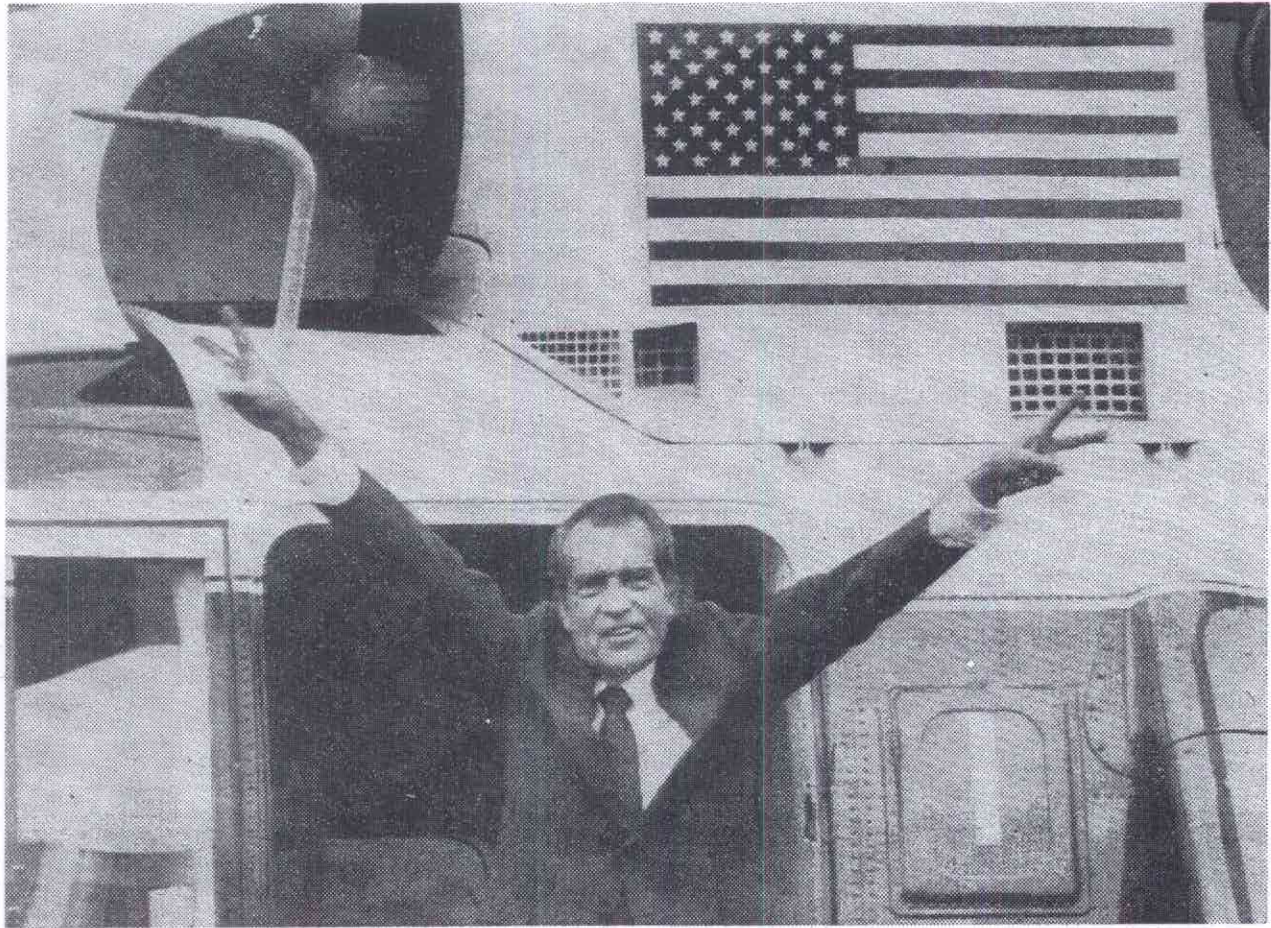
Kissinger thought he had finished. But the President did not rise. He was weeping. And then, still sobbing, Nixon leaned over, striking his fists on the carpet, crying, "What have I done? What has happened?"

Kissinger touched the President, and then held him, tried to console him, to bring rest and peace to the man who was curled on the carpet like a child. The President of the United States. Kissinger tried again to reassure him, reciting Nixon's accomplishments.

Finally the President struggled to his feet. He sat back down in his chair. The storm had passed. He had another drink.

Kissinger lingered. He talked on, building a case, pour-

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President Nixon waves farewell as he boards helicopter on leaving the White House Aug. 9, 1974.

ing his academic talents into a lecture on why Richard Nixon would go down in history as one of the great peacemakers of all time. "You made the tough decisions," he said.

The two men had a few more drinks. Their conversation drifted around to personalities and to the role Nixon might be able to play once he was out of office. He might be an adviser, or a special ambassador. Nixon wondered if he would be exonerated by history. Kissinger was encouraging; he was willing to say anything. But he was thinking that Nixon would never escape the verdict of Watergate.

As he got up to leave, Kissinger realized that Nixon had never really asked as much of him as he had that night. Vietnam, Cambodia, Russia, China—they all seemed easier. Weak in the knees, his clothes damp from perspiration, Kissinger escaped. And he realized that though he was the President's only top adviser to survive Watergate, he had never really been consulted about resignation.

As he walked through the West Wing corridor to his office, Kissinger thought he had never felt as close to or as far from Richard Nixon. Never as close to or as far from anyone he had ever known.

Lawrence Eagleburger and Brent Scowcroft, key Kissinger aides, were waiting. It was almost eleven. Kissinger looked somber and drained. He did not shout orders, ask for messages, make phone calls or demand reports. He was clearly upset. To get control over his own tensions, Kissinger began talking about the encounter. The President was definitely resigning, he said.

"It was the most wrenching thing I have ever gone through in my life—hand holding," Kissinger added. The President was a broken man. What a traumatic experience it had been, what a profound shock to see a man at the end of his rope. He was convinced that historians would at least treat Nixon better than his contemporaries had, but it might take some time before that particular revisionist history would be written.

Scowcroft mentioned that he thought it significant that the President had turned to Kissinger for sustenance in his most awful moment. Not to Gen. Alexander Haig, the White House chief of staff, not to any of the others.

"Henry," Eagleburger said, "at times I've thought you're not human. But I was wrong. I've never seen you so moved."

The phone rang. It was the President.

Eagleburger picked up an extension to listen. That was the custom—Kissinger never took a call alone. Eagleburger was shocked. The President was slurring his words. He was drunk. He was out of control.

"It was good of you to come up and talk, Henry," the President said. "I've made the decision, but you must stay. You must stay on for the good of the country."

Eagleburger could barely make out what the President was saying. He was almost incoherent. It was pathetic. Eagleburger felt ill and hung up.

The President had one last request. "Henry, please don't ever tell anyone that I cried and that I was not strong."



"For months, David (Eisenhower) had been 'waiting for Mr. Nixon to go bananas,' as he sometimes phrased it. David thought the President might commit suicide."

Buchanan would imitate Nixon closing his eyes and pushing the button that erased the rest of the 18½ minutes. Buchanan's theory was that Nixon gave the tape to Woods because she would know what to do with it . . . When he got to the part about the President closing his eyes, Buchanan would laugh uproariously."

But there is nothing remotely funny about the Kafkaesque sense of fear and suspicion within the Nixon White House. "Even in the security of the White House, they were afraid of leaving the tapes alone for a few minutes in a locked room," the authors say at one point, in describing the feelings of lawyers listening alone to the tapes.

One of the clearest examples of Nixon's desperate struggle to save himself, even if it means misleading everyone around him, involves John Dean. Nixon attempts totally to discredit Dean. "I have Dean on tape," he tells Henry Petersen, the man in charge of the Justice Department's initial Watergate investigation. He is referring to Dean's public accusation that an April 15th White House conversation with Nixon clearly puts the President in the middle of the cover-up.

When Nixon gives this information, his tape-recording system is still secret. Petersen mentions the Dean "tape" to Archibald Cox, to assure the first special prosecutor of Nixon's innocence. Cox immediately asks the White House for the April 15th tape. Nixon demurs. There is no "tape." Petersen misunderstood him, misquoted him. It was a Dictabelt recording, not a tape. When the taping system is revealed, and subpoenas are issued, the April 15th Dean-Nixon tape is missing. It inadvertently wasn't recorded, the White House says.

Cox then asks for the Dictabelt. The President refuses. Executive privilege. In the White House, Nixon's lawyers begin searching for the Dictabelt. They can't find it. When the President is told how bad it will look if both the April 15th tape, and his own Dictabelt recorded recollection of that day are missing, Nixon's reply to a White

House lawyer is chilling:

"Why can't we make a new Dictabelt?"

At that point the unacceptable fact of Nixon's guilt begins to sink into some of his closest aides. They, too, are being swept, unwillingly, into the conspiracy.

No one in the White House, or, indeed, in Washington, could escape being affected by the consuming Watergate story as it twisted, turned, and finally engulfed the President and all those around him. They were all, in a sense, victims, and probably none more

than the President's wife, Pat. Those last months became increasingly *lonely* ones for Mrs. Nixon, the book says. Her public appearances became less frequent and shorter, and she began spending more and more of her days in her pale yellow bedroom on the second floor of the White House. More often than not, in those final days, her luncheon tray would be returned with the food untouched. The book sketches this picture:

"When she and the President dined alone, there was always a great rush to get the food from the kitchen to the table. Often the Nixons had been seated for only a minute before the butlers started pressing to serve them.

"Why the big rush? a member of the kitchen staff had asked.

"A minute is a long time when you're not talking," a butler had explained.

"On Camp David weekends, the President and his wife hardly saw each other. When they did, silence usually prevailed. Backstairs their distance was an open secret. Marine Lieutenant Colonel Jack Brennan, the President's military aide, joked that his duties included briefing Nixon on how to kiss his wife.

"Mrs. Nixon had always hated being a political wife. Since Nixon had come to Washington as a Congressman, she had yearned to return permanently with her husband and children to California and live like an ordinary Ameri-

can family.

"She and her husband had not really been close since the early 1960s, the First Lady confided to one of her White House physicians. She had wanted to divorce him after his 1962 defeat in the California gubernatorial campaign. She tried, and failed, to win his promise not to seek office again. Her rejection of his advances since then had seemed to shut something off inside Nixon. But they had stuck it out.

"Watergate, and the tapes particularly, widened the gap. Despite the rein she kept on her emotions, the transcripts had visibly disturbed her. 'How foolish to have tapes' she told her few friends and several chosen assistants. She would then smile or laugh nervously. The tapes were like love letters, she said. They should have been burned or destroyed.

"The White House physicians were worried about the First Lady. She had returned from a South American trip in April 1973 distraught and even more underweight than usual. She was becoming more and more reclusive, and drinking heavily. On several occasions members of the household staff came upon her in the pantry of the second-floor kitchen, where the liquor was kept, in the early afternoon. Awkwardly, she had tried to hide her tumbler of bourbon on the rocks."

Of Richard Nixon himself, our most tortured presidential figure, millions of words already have been written. In

the years to come innumerable analyses undoubtedly will appear. But there is, in this latest account, an intriguing possible key to Nixon's true character.

After his secret taping system was surprisingly disclosed, Nixon gave Fred Buzhardt some of his personal and most private thoughts in the form of Dictabelts. They contained recordings of his daily reflections. Buzhardt listened, and instantly realized these clearly never had been intended to be heard by anyone else. Nixon hadn't even let his trusted Rose Woods transcribe them. Why he gave them to Buzhardt is somewhat unclear. Nixon himself implied they might allay his lawyer's suspicions. To quote the book again:

"From those recordings—sometimes they were small cassettes—Buzhardt believed he had heard Nixon with his defenses peeled away. It was rare for a man in such a public position to keep so truthfully a diary, Buzhardt told Haig. Normally the diaries of public men serve to provide a cover story for history. The Nixon dictations were a stark contrast. Buzhardt said that his own most emotional moments in all of Watergate had come as he listened to the President reveal his emotions. The tapes provided a dark, almost Dostoevskian journey into Nixon's fears, obsessions, hostilities, passions and inadequacies.

"Buzhardt, who had spent years consulting doctors about his mother's mental illness, felt that the dictating sessions were genuine therapy for Nixon. The lawyer would not reveal any details, even to Haig. He would say only that Nixon had talked out of his real feelings and, oddly, he would discourse on everyday occurrences—the weather, the flowers in the White House garden, birds."

It probably comes as no great surprise, then, to hear Nixon, at the end, being quoted as discussing the prospect of jail with an air of resignation. If they wanted to put him in prison, let them. He referred to Gandhi and other political prisoners. They had written their memoirs from a jail cell. "The best writing done by politicians has been done from jail."

He didn't have to, of course. Even now, we are told, he is working on those memoirs from the security and comfort of his own Elba, at San Clemente in California. San Clemente. From the Spanish, and long before that the Romans, and then back into the English. Clement: Merciful, lenient, compassionate, mild. Richard Nixon now has his pardon, if not his peace, but the memory of his actions has not yet faded. It still haunts our lives and invades our dreams.