

PRESENT AT THE DEMISE: Diary entries for Nixon's last four days in office, August 5-9, 1974

Note: The best record of the impeachment proceedings against President Andrew Johnson in 1868 was written by George Clemenceau, a brilliant, 27-year-old Frenchman who is better known in history as the Tiger of Europe when he was the leader of France in World War I. When I came to Washington in 1973, then 32 years old, to witness the spectacle of Nixon's removal from office over Watergate, Clemenceau's journal was my model and the touchstone for my own chronicle. I fancied myself to be, figuratively, Clemenceau's successor, though I have not later become the leader of my nation.

I was also drawn to Clemenceau's diary because of a similarity in the times we were writing about. There was a link, I thought, between the post-Civil War and the post-Vietnam eras. Johnson was removed in a period known as the Reconstruction. I felt that in the mid-1970s we were in need of a Second Reconstruction in America where we too needed to bind up the wounds of divisive war and scandal. The Vietnam War needed to be definitively ended, and Nixon needed to be removed from office, and then the reconciliation and reconstruction of the nation could begin.

Below are my diary entries for the last four days of Nixon's presidency. They are patterned on Clemenceau's diary, and recount my activities and impressions during those heady last hours.

August 5, 1974, 8 p.m.

At six thirty tonight, my father called telling me to turn on the television. "He's going down the drain," he said. And so it has broken. The President has released the transcript of a June 23, 1972 conversation, only five days after the Watergate break-in, that shows beyond doubt what we have felt all along, but have been unable to prove: that Nixon set the coverup in motion immediately after the break-in. He admits the tape may damage his case. The President pleads that this new revelation be put in perspective of the whole case; that if it is done so, the public will see that it does not justify his removal from office.

Tomorrow the details will be clearer. Now Charles Wiggins, the President's most eloquent defender in the House Impeachment Committee, appears on the screen.

“This is not the time for the President to gather in the White House with his lawyers to discuss his defense in the Senate. It is the time for him to gather with the Vice-President, the Chief Justice, the leaders of the House and Senate to discuss the orderly transition of power from Richard Nixon to Gerald Ford. I have painfully concluded, with deep personal sorrow, that if he does not do so....”---his voice broke, and he was silent for a moment---“his Administration must be terminated involuntarily. Therefore, I will vote for Article 1....”

How I admire Wiggins suddenly. He was brilliant in his defense, his language elegant, his points telling, his professionalism respected by all. By his efforts he prodded the Committee to make its case firm. And in it all, he too had been deceived. How well I remember him saying not four days ago how proud he would be to be called upon as a defender of the President in a Senate trial.

Other Republican stalwarts on the Committee follow Wiggins: Wiley Mayne of Iowa and David Dennis of Indiana. Even tough-guy, Charles Sandman (R-NJ) comes very close. He is going home to his district to reassess his position. In the Senate, Senator Robert Griffin, the Republican minority whip, urges resignation, saying not only for his enemies but his closest friends, Nixon should withdraw for political and personal reasons. (The President would lose his pension if he is convicted in the Senate.)

Several days ago I asked Rep. Pete McCloskey (R-Calif) about this talk that the tide is sweeping toward impeachment. How did one judge a “tide” moving this way or that? “That’s the way it is in politics,” he answered.

August 5, 1974, 11 p.m.

The wail of sirens a block away from us on Capitol Hill. A common sound . But tonight it leads to fantasies. Are they going to get him? Has he tried something dramatic, one last desperate stab at a life line? The manufacture of some crisis? It is a dangerous time, these last few days or hours before a disgraced and humiliated leader relinquishes power. Tonight the man still clinging to power must be close to derangement. Perhaps we are not as stable a society as we think.

Impeachment is so little used that the process of transition tonight seems more akin to the Soviet Union. The rumors...the mental stability of the man himself.....If he has deceived the American people and his defenders and his own family, what is he capable of now? “He can always start a war,” McCloskey told me.

I channel history again. As the House moved to impeach Andrew Johnson, rumors of a coup d'état were rife. Johnson had called in General Emory, commander of the Washington District, to inquire if he knew of any movement of troops in the surrounding area. Johnson had had offers of military support from several states. The story went out that 1000 troops were mobilizing in Maryland to march on the Capitol. That rumor, never verified, contributed then to the chaos in Washington.

What will be the parallel now?

August 6, 1974

"So it is all over," the Washington Post says today in an editorial entitled "The Guilty Plea." We have the smoking gun. In some ways it is too easy. I would have preferred the circumstantial case, resting upon the pattern of conduct. This guilty plea has removed the lofty Madisonian tone to the discussion. Now it's back to simple, damning evidence which is beyond all possible doubt. It is a shameful development. The ogre admits that he lied to the public and to his family, betraying his lawyers and supporters. It leaves me with an eptiness in the pit of my stomach.

I spent the day going from one press conference after another, as Congressmen lined up to switch their votes. The biggest switch came from John Rhodes, the Republican minority leader in the House, who admitted that the day before yesterday he was prepared to announce his decision to vote against impeachment. But someone in the White House had mercifully called him in time, warning that new damaging evidence was about to be released. He had cancelled the press conference, pleading a sore throat.

The day moves quickly. Republicans are abandoning Nixon all over town. We hear that the President met with his Cabinet and said again that he had no intention of resigning. The Cabinet gave him a vote of confidence. Word also leaked out that someone in the White House compared Nixon to Captain Queeg, the naval commander gone mad in the midst of a typhoon and relieved of his command of the Caine Mutiny.

If he does not resign in the next few days what other explanation can there be? Rumor has it that his daughter, Julie, is counseling the scorched earth policy. Bring down everybody with you, pa. The more palatable view comes from Wiggins. He thinks the professions not to resign are an elaborate charade to show the world that someone is still President, while behind the scenes they work out the transition of power. He thinks resignation will come in the next few days.

August 7, 1974, 3 p.m.

It's a sparkling, clear day, cool for August, with low humidity. The breeze in Washington is just right for broadcasting wild rumors. Senator Barry Goldwater (R-Ariz) has apparently sent a message to the White House to resign. Vice President Ford met earlier in the day with Chief of Staff, Alexander Haig---was it about the transfer of power? Republican senators are meeting on Capitol Hill, trying to decide if they should send a delegation to demand the President's resignation. Rabbi Korff, Nixon's unofficial spiritual adviser is at the White House, his red Mercedes sports car parked down the way. The Phoenix Gazette and the Providence Journal-Bulletin are quoting "unimpeachable" sources who promise the President will step down later today; the source for the Phoenix paper is said to be Goldwater. A reporter I know welcomes me to come to the White House for the "death watch."

At 3:15 p.m. I check with Dad at the Times. The paper had Kenneth Rush, the President's economic adviser, to lunch, and he maintained the charade. The President would not resign, Rush said, because he sees this as a struggle between the forces of good and evil. Rush admits only that we are dealing with an unpredictable, perhaps irrational man now. Nixon might do anything.

At 4 o'clock I catch a glimpse of Gerald Warren, the deputy press secretary, talking to reporters in the slipway. He cannot deny Goldwater's statement about resignation, because he did not hear what Goldwater said. These little nuances are given great weight around her. Someone asks him if he can assure us that the President will not resign before 5:30 p.m. The reporters are very interested in the report that Edward Cox, Tricia Nixon's husband, has flown in from New York. People imagine a happy family scene on television.

At 4:56 p.m. I'm standing near the ticker deep in the bowels of the White House press room when I hear the of a TV technician squawk that Senator Goldwater and Senator Hugh Scott, the Senate Minority Leader, have just entered the White House. "Did you actually see Goldwater?""Yeah, he went through a side entrance." I head quickly out on the lawn, and for once I'm ahead of everybody rather than on the back fringe. Within seconds the whole press corps has emptied out onto the lawn, and there are frantic questions about who actually saw Goldwater and Scott with their very own eyes. There's a time check: 5"06. Everything must be recorded for history.

Shortly afterward, someone shouts out "Briefing", and the throng funnels back into the small briefing room. Gerald Warren comes out and confirms that indeed the two senators and Congressman John Rhodes have begun to meet with the President. Questions are hurled at

him: "Jerry, will there be a statement afterwards?" "Why not in the briefing room with the good PA system instead of out on the lawn?" It's an ugly scene.

By this time the feeling that we're going to get a resignation today droops. Warren says the President invited the three legislators only for an "assessment." That's a different cast than earlier in the day. An assessment is different than a demand.

Shortly after 5:30 p.m. the legislators emerge and make their way through the press scrum. They keep it low key. Senator Scott, with his pencil mustache and pipe, says it was just "four old friends talking over a painful situation." But he says he told the President that the situation in the Senate was "gloomy" and "distressing." He also describes the President as "serene" and "in good spirits and in good health." This last seems to refer to Nixon's mental health. Goldwater quotes the President as saying that whatever decision he makes will be in the national interest. They claim they made no recommendations to the President about what he should do. They just gave their assessment. Later that assessment is reported to be that the President might get ten votes against impeachment in the House and fifteen votes against conviction in the Senate.

All afternoon the crowd outside the White House fence has grown. They stand quietly. Many hold onto the bars of the fence above their heads. From the inside they look like vultures.

August 8, 1974, 2 p.m.

I was tipped off that the press secretary would hold a briefing at noon, and so I rushed to the White House. Gerald Ford was meeting with Nixon at that hour, the radio in the cab blared. Just as I walked up the sidewalk after being cleared through the gate, Ford came striding out of the door at that very moment, looking athletic and larger than I expected, accompanied by an aide and a few secret service men. I had to restrain myself from saying "Congratulations" as he went past.

The press room was packed. Someone said it felt like the steering room on the Titanic. Outside I could hear cars honking. There were signs out there: "Honk if you think he's guilty!" "Honk because he's leaving" and "Honk if you're against immunity."

My timing had been perfect. Not five minutes after I was in the briefing room, the press secretary, Ronald Ziegler appeared, looking haggard and on the verge of tears. His voice cracked as he announced that the President would meet with Congressional leaders in the afternoon and then address the nation at 9 p.m. I tried to take down his words exactly in the

crunch, resting my pad on my brother's shoulder as I scribbled. But there was a pause, and when I looked up, Ziegler was gone. He had been at the podium for about 90 seconds.

I went out to hail a cab on 18th Street and passed a young man who was handing out bumper stickers that read:

FORGIVE NIXON

He saved us from World War III

August 9, 1974, 11 a.m.

At this moment President is airborne to California. His power will pass to Gerald Ford somewhere over Kansas. He will not be at the swearing in of his successor, just as Andrew Johnson was not at the swearing in of Ulysses S. Grant. In both cases, their presence would have been awkward.

He gave a long, rambling farewell to his Cabinet and staff before he left. At times it was genuinely moving, but not so much from what he said as from the situation: a man more humiliated than any in American history, and his fight was over. He choked with emotion as he spoke of his father, a failure first as a street car motorman, then as a lemon farmer---"he sold the farm before they discovered oil on it."---and later as a grocer, but he was still a great man because he tried. And his mother was a saint, he said. His free association was maudlin and embarrassing. His self pity was like a sloppy drunk at a bar.

At other times he was combative. Not one member of his Administration had ever enriched himself by Government service, not one. At other times he was didactic. Never hate your enemies, he said, because then you will always lose. At the end he made a point of saying "au revoir" as if we would be seeing one another again. But it is adieu, and everyone but him knows it. He showed no contrition.

When it was over, he waved from the door of the helicopter and even flashed the V sign. What, I wondered will he do in those last minutes of power somewhere over Kansas?

Perhaps he will declare a universal amnesty, pardoning himself and all the Vietnam resisters at the same time. Again I fall back on George Clemenceau's treatment of Andrew Johnson's proclamation in his last days of power.

"January 5, 1869: "The most important event of the period has been the proclamation issued by Mr. Johnson granting a pardon and amnesty to all who have been, or are now, under judicial indictment for having taken part in the rebellion. The public has been hoping for a long

time that this step would be taken....The proclamation allows him to crown his career with a final act of clemency and magnanimity.”

No, Nixon will not do that.