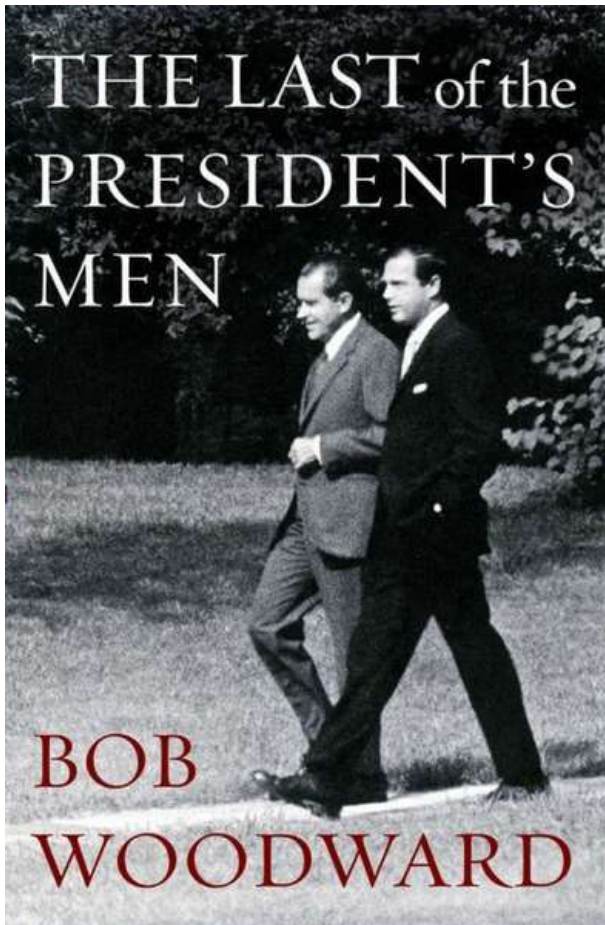


Woodward's Butterfield book is full of intrigue

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"The Last of the President's Men," by Bob Woodward. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015, 304 pages, \$28.



“On the morning of June 17, 1972, Butterfield was listening to the radio as he drove to the White House,” Bob Woodward explains in “The Last of the President’s Men,” his new volume about Alexander Butterfield, one of the last surviving eyewitnesses to Richard Nixon’s self-destruction during the early 1970s. “For Butterfield a presence at the West Wing on Saturday was routine, even though Nixon was in Key Biscayne. The news report caught his attention. In the early morning hours five men in business suits had been arrested with bugging equipment and sophisticated photographic equipment in the Democratic Party headquarters at the Watergate office building.”

As anyone who lived through this dark period in our nation’s history can recall, the relatively inauspicious event Woodward is describing was the beginning of a saga that led to the disgrace and resignation of the elected leader of the most powerful country on earth. Butterfield’s role in Nixon’s ultimate downfall is widely known: He was the aide who disclosed to Congress the existence of a secret White House taping system that in the final analysis proved to be the president’s undoing.

But there was so much more to the Nixon presidency than the criminal events for which he is now most remembered. Nixon was a complex player on the global stage who engaged in questionable and borderline behaviors – both individually and institutionally – throughout his long political career. Butterfield’s insights and interpretations are particularly useful as he had a front row seat to history as it was playing out during the period covered by the book; his office was literally adjacent to the president’s. If you think you know the full story of Nixon’s distorted and narcissistic perspective of what he could do as leader of the free world, then you are in for a rude awakening with Woodward’s latest offering.

As is usually the case, it was the little vignettes Woodward includes that I found the most revealing, both about Nixon as well as Butterfield. For example, in the epilogue the author describes one of the many meetings he had with the retired Air Force colonel while putting the final touches on this latest addition to the Watergate archives:

“On one of my visits to his penthouse in California, I walked along a hallway 20 feet long where he had hung 30 framed photographs,” Woodward writes. “To my surprise they were almost exclusively from his Nixon White House days – Nixon with his family; Butterfield with Nixon outside on the White House grounds; Butterfield’s family with Nixon; Butterfield in numerous White House meetings, large and small; Butterfield with Nixon in the Oval Office; Nixon with Sammy Davis Jr.; Butterfield testifying and disclosing the secret taping system to the Senate Watergate Committee; Nixon’s resignation-day farewell address when he was sweating and overwrought with emotion.”

“Here was the paradox on the wall,” he continues. “On the one hand, the photographs were there to remind visitors, and perhaps himself, that he had been there at the center of things and been an intimate witness to it all. On the other hand, they were there to show he was the one who testified about the secret taping system and lit a fuse that helped bring it all down.”

Woodward is one of the most accomplished journalists and authors ever to commit word to paper. An associate editor for the Washington Post, he is the author of 17 previous books, 12 of which have been No. 1 national best-sellers. He is still best known for his role in bringing down the Nixon presidency. My first acquaintance with his work came in 1984, when I read “Wired: The Short Life and Fast Times of John Belushi.” His ability to get to the essence of an individual’s motivations is unmatched.

The manuscript is meticulously researched, with 15 pages of source notes and an extensive appendix consisting of 31 document reproductions at the conclusion of the prologue, 27 chapters and an epilogue that comprise the main text. In conducting the research essential for an undertaking of this magnitude, Woodward eventually accumulated more than 46 hours of taped interviews with Butterfield, which allowed him to bring a distinctive “first-person” feel to much of his prose. In many places throughout the narrative, you get the impression you are literally in the room with the man conversing about events he seems to recall as if they happened only yesterday – not more than four decades ago.

Butterfield has always insisted that he did the right thing when he told the truth about the clandestine recording system (he was never prosecuted, unlike many of his associates). Still, many of his contemporaries, especially those in the military, never forgave him for what they saw as a betrayal of the president. In their minds, loyalty was more important than integrity.

“Because of the tapes disclosure, Butterfield was radioactive,” Woodward writes near the end of the book. “He sent out resumes to 88 firms and finally got a job as chief operating officer of International Air Service Co. in San Francisco. In 1979, he moved to Los Angeles as president and chief operating officer of California Life Corp., a financial holding company, at \$150,000 a year. He joined the Bel-Air Country Club and felt financially secure for the first time since leaving government.”

Personally, I found the appendix to be one of the most fascinating features of “The Last of the President’s Men.” The declassified memoranda, journal pages, meeting notes and other assorted documents – presented as they originally appeared, many with hand-written notes in the margins – provide an intimate look at the inner workings of the Nixon administration that I feel will still astound and intrigue readers today. As Woodward notes in the prologue, “So the story, like most of history, does not end.”

As is the case with most of Woodward’s work, this one is a page-turner. Pick up a copy.

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