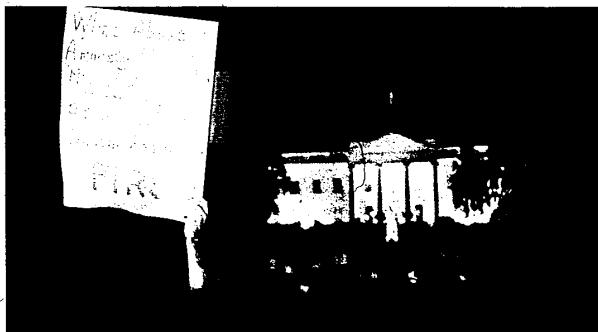


*A weary crowd watches
the final moments
of a President
slipping away amidst...*



...The raw ingredients of history

By ROBERT KIPPER

WASHINGTON, D.C. — It was already dark along Pennsylvania Avenue. The crowd was starting to assemble, network camera crews were busy readying equipment, unsmiling security guards were just beginning to earn their pay.

At the head of the commotion stood the White House — stately, frozen, as impressive as a post card or the ink print on a coin suddenly in one of the tall front windows beneath the North Portico, a solitary figure parts the curtains to watch the activity.

She stands there, dressed in red, for a few moments and quietly allows the curtains to return to stillness.

Rosemary Woods, to be sure. Or maybe Pat herself.

IN THIS drama-charged setting, every motion, every phrase, every face carries added significance. For it is Washington, D.C., Aug. 8. The once-powerful and still-proud President is surrendering his office.

Each act, be it a hand parting a curtain or a fist raised from beyond the front gate, burps into the mind "history in the making."

Throughout the five-and-a-half years of President Richard M. Nixon's presidency, crowds such as these came to watch history.

Be it the intensification of a war, shootings at Kent State, Christmas bombings in Southeast Asia, they came. They brought children, dogs, papier-mache masks, posters, backdrops and instantiates.

They wore innocence, fear, hostility on their faces. How typical and somehow fitting that many of the same faces and the same posters came to watch the end of the Nixon Presidency or, as one demonstrator put it, be on hand to hear him, "Say goodnight, Dick."

THE CROWD was less spirited, less spontaneous than years ago. They gathered and chanted also routinely, as if this one more time they had to be there.

Assembled in the nation's capital, one of the only two areas which refused to join the Nixon landslide in 1972, the crowd would by definition be less supportive of Nixon than the nation at large.

Yet many states and many age groups were assembled here. Those who stood on the fringes of the crowd — the middle-aged and older people — didn't particularly savor the activity or participate in the chanting, but they were present and not critical of the demonstrations.

If Nixon's 37th address and the almost 2,000 days of his administration seemed unimaginative, so does the slogans of those who opposed him.

"Jail to the chief." "Executive deleted." "One, two, three, four — Richard Nixon out the door." "Throw away the key."

STILL, FOR all the activity at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue this historic evening, there was ambivalence and even weariness. Silent crowds gathered around small, portable televisions on the lawn as an equally serious and uncheerful looking Walter Cronkite prepared them for the President's long goodbye.

Only after the President began speaking, as he failed to acknowledge any blame, did the crowd heckle or laugh or issue language that would never show up undeleted on a Presidential transcript.

A crowd might assemble, chant or even perform on cue, but little interest was present in discussing the Watergate scandal.

If a reporter had difficulty inventing a new question or a new angle, the answer displayed the same played-out feeling.

Even in Washington bars, Watergate discussion was barely audible.

As a waitress in one hotel lounge described it, a crowd gathered while Nixon gave his speech. While the speech was delivered, she said, "It was so quiet, you could hear everyone breathing."

Once it was over, much of the crowd dispersed and discussion returned to other matters.

IF PEOPLE were tired or at least ambivalent about Nixon's political demise, they seemed equally ambivalent about Gerald Ford's beginning. Some of the demonstrators, as expected, were derisive of the near-stranger from Grand Rapids.

One group chanted, "We don't want a Ford." Another group puzzled, "Was his middle name Rudolf or Adolf?" Most caustic, but still holding back, was a black man who said that Ford has a lot to learn about black people.

Most of those asked faintly expected better things from a Ford presidency, but not too many knew enough about him to say why.

A former Michigan woman, who now works in a Congressman's office, tried to be positive.

"Well, Ford has a personality, not much of one, but a personality."

A cab driver who claims to know a lot about Washington politics and personalities guessed Ford might be the least known figure to become President since Harry S. Truman, despite Ford's many years in the House.

A New Jersey girl thought Ford "a nice man" but had misgivings.

"Should somebody who has been elected by just the voters in Grand Rapids be President?" she wondered.



Photographed by Gary Friedman

