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# Inside a presidential marriage

Will Swift's portrait of Pat and Richard Nixon takes an unaccountably rosy view

BY TOM MORAN

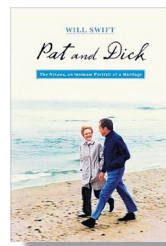
Americans have an undying fascination with political couples. Whether it's Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt, John and Jackie Kennedy, Bill and Hillary Clinton or Barack and Michelle Obama, we are obsessed with prying in a voyeuristic way into public figures' private lives.

But few political partnerships are as enigmatic or intriguing as that of Richard Nixon and his wife, Pat, a "complex and mysterious" relationship examined by Will Swift in his romanticized dual biography, "Pat and Dick: The Nixons, An Intimate Portrait of a Marriage." Note the billing: as with Joseph P. Lash's 1971 classic "Eleanor and Franklin," this book aims to give the wife in this political partnership some long overdue equal time.

When Richard Nixon (referred to by the author as "Dick") first met Pat Ryan, he was immediately smitten, and with his customary dogged determination was prepared to undergo any humiliation at her hands to win her. Nowadays we would consider Nixon's behavior during their courtship grounds for a restraining order (Pat later told a biographer that she thought her suitor was "nuts or something"), but it worked. Nixon overcame her initial indifference, wore down her resistance, and eventually made her his wife. It was the first victory that made all his future victories possible.

It is hard to read about Pat Nixon's difficult if not traumatic childhood and not deeply admire the strength and determination that allowed her to overcome obstacles that would have crushed a lesser person. But as you get further into Swift's account of the Nixons' marriage and their journey through American politics, you start to wonder whether Pat Nixon was really suited to be a political wife, or if her chronic inability to let go of a grudge exacerbated her husband's worst instincts.

When Nixon, after his humiliating loss in the California gubernatorial race in 1962 (which most people at the time thought ended his career in politics), lashed out drunkenly at the press in his so-called "last press conference," his wife, "still bitter about press coverage of her husband," rather than being appalled at Nixon's intemperate outburst, yelled "Bravo!" There is a very fine line between being supportive of one's spouse and being an enabler of his bad behavior; if Nixon was, as Swift points out, "quick to feel victimized," his wife was even quicker to agree with him.



## Pat and Dick

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governor of California in 1962, finally acquiesced to the campaign, sighing to their famous dog, "Well, Checkers, here we go again." You can almost picture the woman rolling her eyes.

"One reason that the Nixons are fascinating," writes Swift, "is that they embody marital ambivalence. ... Dick was drawn to and grounded by Pat's discipline and her ability to structure their home life. He also rebelled against it. He loved her dignity and her righteousness, and yet he

chafed at her distaste for public life and its ethical compromises."

"Ethical compromises" is pretty much a euphemism when it comes to Richard Nixon, as Swift proves when his rose-colored account runs smack into the Watergate scandal (at which point he begins to accede to the gravity of the situation by referring to the scandal-plagued president as "Nixon," instead of "Dick"). Swift seems to believe that, had Nixon only listened to his wife (who detested Nixon's arrogant White House Chief of Staff H.R. Haldeman; he returned the favor by referring to the First Lady as "Thelma," her actual given name), the whole nasty scandal, and the president's eventual resignation in disgrace, might have been avoided.

This is doubtful; after all, when Nixon finally agreed to let his wife accompany him on his trip to China in 1972, he told Haldeman "If Pat goes, she goes solely as a prop." He did not let his family in on the criminal conduct that led to his downfall until he was on the verge of resigning, at which point there was nothing to be done about it; as Nixon told his family, "Well, I screwed it up good, real good, didn't I?"

After a difficult (and on Nixon's part nearly fatal) transition to civilian life, the Nixons did seem to find some sort of domestic contentment in their post-White House years, as the couple delighted in their grandchildren and Nixon worked on his remarkable transformation from unindicted co-conspirator to respected elder statesman. Pat Nixon's death from cancer devastated him. "On the day of Pat's funeral," Swift relates, "a mourner told Nixon aide Leonard Garment that 'Dick would be dead within the year.' He was."

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