Nixon in American Memory

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In Search of the "Real Nixon"

In one sense or another, Richard M. Nixon was always covering up. Throughout his long tenure on the American political stage, he concealed his illicit activities, his secret diplomacy, and his inner feelings. Socially awkward, personally inhibited, lacking in spontaneity, he constantly hid behind a series of public personae. According to John Herbers, a reporter who covered him for *The New York Times*, Nixon was "a distant and enigmatic figure as seen backwards through a telescope."[1] "Nixon remains the most enigmatic of American presidents," agreed his admirer Paul Johnson, a conservative British journalist, " . . . the inner man is almost totally inaccessible."[2] Adlai Stevenson, the Democrats' presidential nominee in 1952 and 1956, said it first and perhaps best: "This is a man of many masks," he stated, "but who can say they have seen his real face?"[3]

This elusiveness helped to make Nixon a hotly contested symbol, probably more than any other American politician. Easily our most controversial president, he was viewed in starkly contrasting ways by different groups in society. For fifty years, Nixon relished combat, nourished suspicions, and polarized citizens. No one was more admired (he was the most respected man in America four years in a row, Gallup reported), yet no one more loathed (for six years, he ranked among the world's most hated men, twice edging out Hitler). The editor Michael Korda called Nixon "the one American president of this century about whom it is absolutely impossible to be indifferent."[4]

Nixon's protean quality, his ability to assume different forms in the eyes of his interpreters, is especially striking given his unparalleled longevity and prominence in post-World War II American politics. For half a century he stood at or near the center of American life, garnering headlines as a congressman, senator, vice-president, president, ex-president, and deceased president. The journalist Theodore H. White ranked him together with Franklin Delano Roosevelt "as the most enduring American politicians of the twentieth century." He galvanized debates over the Red Scare, negative campaigning, Vietnam, the Great Society, the media's role in politics, and Watergate. After his resignation in 1974, *New York Times* columnist Anthony Lewis called the years since World War II "the Age of Nixon," a term echoed by other historians.[5]

Compounding Nixon's inscrutability was his dedication to controlling the impression he made on others. His obsession with public relations—pronounced even for politicians—made his true self even harder to identify. Examples of his concern with his appearance are legion. To note but one, Nixon once told his chief of staff, H. R. Haldeman, that he needed a full-time public relations adviser who could coach him on matters including "how I should stand, where the cameras will be," and even "whether I should [hold] the phone with my right hand or my left hand." Given "the millions of dollars that go into one lousy thirty-second spot advertising a deodorant," he said, it was "unbelievable" that his image didn't receive equal attention.[6] Even the joke that haunted him his whole career—"Would you buy a used car from this man?"—spoke to his relentless yet clumsy efforts at salesmanship.[7]

Nixon often refashioned his public identity. As early as 1953, journalists wrote about the emergence of a "new Nixon." Apparently coined by an Alabama newspaper, the term would resurface at each stage of Nixon's career.[8] Some of these "new Nixons" gained wide acceptance. In 1960, Nixon resolved to erase his old reputation as a below-the-belt campaigner and wound up losing the presidency to John F. Kennedy by only a whisker. In 1968, Nixon persuaded critics, including the skeptical Walter Lippmann, that he had evolved into "a maturer, mellower man who is no longer clawing his way to the top."[9] But as often as Nixon remade himself, he equally often met failure; his failures ended up directing attention to his attempts at manipulation. Indeed, the transparency of these efforts, their sheer clumsiness, reinforced the long-standing view of him as a chameleon and an opportunist.

Thus, alongside the motif of the "new Nixon," a related theme runs through the Nixon literature: the search for the "real Nixon." With that search came "disturbing speculation," in the words of his first psychoanalytic biographer, Bruce Mazlish, "about who the 'real' Nixon is." Mazlish's biography bore the title *In Search of Nixon*;[10] others were called *The Nixon Nobody Knows*, *Richard Nixon: The Man Behind the Mask*, *The Real Nixon*.[11] But many doubted that any real Nixon existed. The historian William Appleman Williams called the search "a shell game without a pea."[12]

To study the series of images that Nixon projected from 1946, when he first ran for Congress, to the present is to tour the social history of America in the post-World War II era, for each of his personae reveals not only his qualities but also features of his interpreters.[13] More narrowly, however, it can be instructive to examine how Nixon has been remembered since his resignation in 1974. For while there has been much talk to the effect that Nixon succeeded in rehabilitating himself, a close study of Nixon's image in American memory belies such easy conclusions.[14] On

the contrary, while recent years have witnessed the emergence of various "new Nixons" to challenge his older image as America's chief villain, none of these new interpretations has earned dominance. Indeed, talk of each "new Nixon" has ultimately served to reinforce the perdurability of Nixon's persona as an unscrupulous and incorrigible manipulator.

Nixon's Images, 1946–1974

Before exploring the more recent images of Nixon that have gained currency, it is worth reviewing briefly the parade of Nixons that traversed the national scene between 1946 and 1974. Not every one of those personae is well remembered. For example, at the time of his political debut, Nixon was widely regarded as a kind of populist everyman.[15] Entrepreneurs and professionals on the make in postwar Southern California rallied around Nixon in 1946, regarding the young candidate as the embodiment of the traditional principles of hard work, family, religion, and patriotism, which they feared were in eclipse under New Deal liberalism. Clean-cut Navy veteran, new father, family man, churchgoer—Nixon struck these Southland conservatives as the personification of their time-honored values. Magazine and newspaper profiles fawned over him. "He looks like the boy who lived down the block from all of us," gushed the *Washington Times-Herald*; "he's as typically American as Thanksgiving."[16] Over the next few years, through his efforts to expose Alger Hiss as a Soviet spy, he won largely warm words from journalists and even many liberals. Negative portrayals of Nixon are almost entirely absent from the historical record during his first years in Washington.[17]

By 1952, however, a rival view was emerging. That year's presidential election catapulted Nixon to fame as the Republican Party's vice-presidential nominee, and a new image of him crystallized that was practically a photographic negative of his supporters' middle-class hero. Many liberals and intellectuals who had closely watched Nixon's career were already disturbed by his lacerating attacks on all manner of opponents as "soft on communism." Starting with the Checkers speech—the historic address televised in September 1952 in which Nixon defended himself from charges of financial chicanery—these critics refined a portrait of Nixon as not merely a Red-baiter but an unprincipled opportunist who used the new techniques of television, advertising, and public relations to hoodwink the middle classes into thinking he was one of them. Liberals saw Nixon as a quintessentially inauthentic mid-century man, whose opportunism, when harnessed to his mastery of propaganda, threatened American democracy itself.[18]

These were the origins of "Tricky Dick," a nickname that stayed with Nixon his whole life.[19] But even the negative portraits of Nixon that

emerged in the 1950s and then proliferated during his presidency were not monolithic. They varied in nuance and emphasis as new constituencies reinterpreted Nixon in light of their own concerns. The radical young activists of the New Left who had become a political force by the time of Nixon's presidency saw him as something more nefarious than the Machiavellian opportunist of liberal demonology. For many of these radicals, Nixon embodied the darkest martial and conspiratorial impulses of what they called the "national security state." His stubborn refusal to end the war in Vietnam and his ramping up of repressive law-enforcement measures at home made him seem like a monarch-in-waiting and a Hitler-like dictator. "Tin soldiers and Nixon coming," sang Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young after the killing of Kent State students by National Guardsmen in May 1970, solidifying his link with the American war-making machine. The pages of underground newspapers and left-wing magazines teemed with scathing parody, vitriolic and obscene rants, and caricatures of Nixon as king or Führer.

In a still different vein, the members of the Washington press corps who covered Nixon's White House eschewed such extremism. For them, Nixon's sinister designs lay in his attempts to control the news. This view was hardly limited to radicals. CBS anchorman Walter Cronkite, while accepting the "Broadcaster of the Year" award in 1971, billed Nixon's anti-press campaign "a grand conspiracy."[20] Ben Bradlee, the editor of the *Washington Post*, charged on the Dick Cavett show in 1973 that "the First Amendment is in greater danger than any time I've seen it."[21] Focusing on their backyard concerns, journalists formed a picture of Nixon as the consummate spin doctor (in the parlance of a later day), draining democracy of its lifeblood through a war on the press.[22]

Finally, still other critics of Nixon during his presidency drew on the newly fashionable insights of psychoanalysis to sketch a portrait of him as a repressed and insecure narcissist with an insatiable need for love and power—shortcomings, they argued, that contained the seeds of Watergate. When Nixon acted in ways that defied rational explanation—such as the night in May 1970 he stole out of the White House to mingle with student protesters on the Washington Mall—or when confidants reported him to be cracking under Watergate's strain, these psychoanalytic interpretations, whatever their deficiencies, gained vogue.[23]

Each of these unflattering views of Nixon had unique aspects. But Watergate, a scandal of unprecedented dimensions, had the effect of stressing the commonalities rather than the differences between these personae. After all, "Watergate" became synonymous with the whole panoply of unconstitutional abuses of power that pervaded and defined Nixon's administration. As revelations mounted—the dirty tricks, the enemies lists, the burglars and plumbers, the wiretaps, and the tapes—a

large majority of the public came to see him as a liar, a criminal, and a man without morals. As such, the scandal seemed to end the debate about Nixon's identity. The humor columnist Art Buchwald wrote that a high-level White House source ("Deep Toes") confessed to him, as if it were a mind-bending revelation, that "there is no New Nixon and there never was . . . It was the old Nixon with makeup on";[24] after Watergate, no amount of resourceful image-making seemed able to change the public perception of the president. Though they seem distinct in retrospect, at the time the assorted negative views of Nixon commingled in the singular figure of "Tricky Dick," a uniquely and criminally dishonest president.

New Nixons nonetheless appeared in the years after his ouster. As soon as Nixon left the White House, he labored to resurrect himself, encouraging kinder interpretations and feverishly courting Clio's favor. Nixon did not ultimately manage to rehabilitate himself. But he and his supporters did succeed in introducing competing images of the fallen president into the public debate that would ensure that he would remain a subject of controversy for years to come.

Nixon as Victim

Even before Watergate, Nixon enjoyed the support of a minority of Americans who believed that the president was not a villain but a victim of liberals, radicals, and the media. Even at Nixon's nadir, when he resigned in the summer of 1974, he enjoyed support from 24 percent of Americans, many of whom insisted his sole error lay in provoking the ire of powerful liberals and journalists. The linchpin for this view was the insistence that Nixon's misdeeds were no worse than any other president's but that the press used a "double standard" in judging them. Having nursed a sense of grievance much of his life, Nixon convinced himself that Lyndon Johnson and John Kennedy had sanctioned burglaries no different from those at the Watergate. The belief was false, but undeterred, Nixon responded to the incipient Watergate crisis in June 1972 by pushing the "everybody does it" line. Both in his private conversations and, later, in his public statements, Nixon constantly sounded this theme.[25]

The president and his aides aggressively spread this idea. They contacted grassroots pro-Nixon groups, such as the National Citizens' Committee for Fairness to the Presidency, run by a retired Massachusetts rabbi named Baruch Korff, and brought them into the White House orbit. They planted column ideas with friendly journalists, such as Nixon's longtime friend Victor Lasky, who had secretly been on the payroll of the Committee to Re-Elect the President.[26] They created a "surrogates" program under which Nixon's friends, family members, and aides agreed to mouth White House-issued talking points.

And there were plenty of citizen defenders, media sympathizers, and Republican colleagues who needed no direction from the administration to believe that Nixon was being scapegoated. No one in the White House had to give marching orders to the Southern rock group Lynyrd Skynyrd when it sang in its 1974 hit "Sweet Home, Alabama," the lines "Now Watergate does not bother me/Does your conscience bother you?" The reason this view of Nixon held sway over a certain constituency had less to do with the facts of the Watergate case than with the turmoil of the 1960s. Unreconciled to the revolutionary changes that were transforming America, Nixon's loyalists understood the campaign to oust the president as a metaphor for the cultural displacement of their values of family, propriety, and patriotism. A member of the Italian-American League of Canarsie summarized the common sentiment: "Watergate was bullshit, pure and simple. . . . I don't care what he did. It's disgraceful what they did to the country—the press and Congress and the protesters. . . . I loved Nixon for loving the country."[27] "Nixon, Now More than Ever" had been the president's bumper-sticker slogan during his 1972 campaign; during Watergate, his diehard supporters invested it with new meaning and brandished it with redoubled pride. The more he was pilloried, the more he seemed a victim—the target of a cultural war waged by decadent liberal élites—and the stronger their affection grew. Over time, thanks to their efforts, other Americans showed a greater willingness to treat Nixon as a victim.

At one end of the spectrum of sympathetic feeling for Nixon was a view of him as an essentially pitiable figure. In 1976, singer Neil Young released a bittersweet dirge called "Campaigner" after watching a TV report about a watery-eyed Nixon shuffling into the hospital to visit his wife Pat, who had suffered a stroke. Originally titled "Requiem for a President," the song didn't exactly treat the ex-president as a victim, but it was a far cry from "Ohio." The new song painted Nixon as pathetic and excessively demonized: "Hospitals have made him cry/But there's always a freeway in his eye/Though his beach just got too crowded for his stroll/Roads stretch out like healthy veins/And wild gift horses strain the reins/Where even Richard Nixon has got soul." When the British television personality David Frost interviewed Nixon in 1978, he sought to generate a poignant moment by asking Nixon about Pat's stroke. Although Nixon's standing with the public remained abysmal after the broadcast, 44 percent of Americans nonetheless claimed to feel more compassion for him.[28]

For some, the defanged Nixon even became an object of contrarian admiration. Because the image of Tricky Dick was lodged so securely in the public consciousness, self-styled conservative rebels who reveled in thumbing their noses at liberal norms took to admiring Nixon for his very

unpopularity. One of the most popular television shows of the 1980s was the sitcom "Family Ties," which ran from 1982 to 1989 and starred Michael J. Fox as Alex Keaton, a stereotypical young conservative who rebelled against his parents' countercultural values. Alex's admiration for Nixon was a touchstone of his perversity: his first word as a baby was said to have been "Nixon," and he kept by his bedside an autographed picture of the former president. Yet the character was basically a good-hearted contrarian; his conservatism rendered him annoying but hardly villainous. His support for Nixon was provocative or amusing but never threatening.

In contrast to these mild versions of Nixon's victim persona, a more angry and extreme form was manifest in fantasies that construed Watergate as what White House aide Bruce Herschensohn deemed a "coup d'état . . . by a non-elected coalition of power groups." In far-right (and some far-left) circles, baroque conspiracy theories proliferated. In June 1972, Nixon had concocted a cover story for Watergate that blamed the Central Intelligence Agency for the break-in (he had aides warn the FBI not to delve into the crime too deeply, lest it reveal classified activities). Although later exposed as lies, such theories about the CIA or other government forces scheming to topple Nixon caught the fancy of assorted loyalists, amateur researchers, and professional conspiracy buffs, some of whom called themselves revisionists. A more accurate label might have been "Watergate Deniers," since their scenarios dispensed with the whole train of abuses of which the fateful burglary of June 17, 1972, was but a tiny part. In 1991, there appeared a magnum opus of Watergate Denial called *Silent Coup*, which hypothesized a secret counter-history of Watergate centering on successive plots by White House Counsel John W. Dean and Chief of Staff Al Haig. Though it was taken seriously by very few historians, the book became a best seller. Its popularity revealed a public appetite for a picture of Nixon as a victim rather than the chief perpetrator of the scandal.[29]

But if the image of Nixon as Watergate's main casualty would long retain adherents, it never came close to supplanting the view that his removal from the presidency was warranted—perhaps because it simply did not hold up under scrutiny. Most obviously, while an intense liberal hatred toward Nixon had certainly fueled the drive to oust him, that antagonism was hardly decisive; it was only when members of Nixon's own party, from the moderate Republican Lowell Weicker to the hard-right Barry Goldwater, withdrew their support that Nixon's presidency finally collapsed. Unlike many of the scandals surrounding other presidents or politicians, Watergate transcended ideology or partisan politics; Americans across the spectrum saw Nixon's own crimes as the primary source of his undoing.

Nixon as Statesman

In contrast to the victim image, another reading of Nixon flourished in his last decades, which resonated with a substantially broader swath of the public: that of an elder statesman who redeemed himself after his resignation by offering sage commentary on global affairs. Nixon promoted this image even more assiduously than his victim persona. He styled himself "an *homme sérieux*," as his speechwriter Ray Price asserted, "a man of large vision who knows the world and whose views carry weight."[30] He served up a raft of books, speeches, op-ed pieces, and dinnertime conversations with foreign-policy hands—not to mention legal efforts to thwart the release of government materials that might further embarrass him—to burnish his new look. At Nixon's funeral, this image was most commonly hailed as proof of a purported comeback.

By basing his recovery on his international achievements, Nixon was playing to a long-standing strength. During his presidency, Nixon's foreign policy had been widely judged a success, especially his initiation of diplomatic relations with China and pursuit of détente with the Soviet Union (Vietnam was a major exception). After resigning, Nixon tried to build upon the respect he enjoyed in the diplomatic realm by styling himself a global thinker. To this end, he received the friendly help of what has often been called the foreign-policy establishment—the journalists, government officials, and policy hands who came of age during the Cold War and believed that a president's conduct of foreign affairs should heavily determine his legacy.

Nixon's first gambit in his campaign to rehabilitate himself—a February 1976 trip to Beijing, the scene of his greatest triumph—brought mostly brickbats. Even the normally dispassionate David Broder of the *Washington Post* savaged Nixon as willing to do anything "to salvage for himself whatever scrap of significance he can find in the shambles of his life."[31] By 1981, however, Nixon had moved to New York and begun hosting elaborate dinner parties with key players in journalism and foreign-policy circles. Regaling his guests with stories about Mao Zedong and Charles de Gaulle, Nixon would demonstrate his mastery of issues around the globe.[32] Publicly, too, he cultivated the statesman aura. He wrote book after book, as well as op-ed pieces and magazine articles, opining on foreign policy and appearing on the "Today" show or other unconfrontational television programs for additional exposure. He orchestrated public relations stunts—such as the release in 1992 of a memo criticizing President George Bush's policies toward Russia—to bring himself more attention.[33] And he offered his counsel to his successors, whether they wanted it or not.

This multifaceted campaign eventually created an impression that Nixon had regained a modicum of respectability. When Nixon resigned, his friend Clare Boothe Luce had predicted that his place in history books would be marked by the sentence, "He went to China."[34] By the late 1980s, her forecast seemed to be gaining plausibility. The anxiety-provoking militarism of Reagan's early presidency made many foreign-policy hands nostalgic for Nixon's peace initiatives. Journalists who had plied their craft during the Cold War, such as Theodore H. White and Hugh Sidey, waxed admiring of Nixon, and younger emulators who shared their bias toward foreign policy as preeminent, such as Strobe Talbott of *Time*, recruited Nixon to comment on world affairs.[35]

In popular culture, too, references to Nixon as a skilled diplomat joined the familiar jokes about him as a liar and crook. Nixon's Beijing trip provided the story line for the 1987 opera "Nixon in China," directed by Peter Sellars, whose choice of topic led some reviewers to charge that he was abetting Nixon's whitewashing of history. "Nobody trills [an aria called] Watergate," one sniped.[36] In 1986, Nixon's former aide John Ehrlichman, in his post-prison career as a pulp novelist, wrote a potboiler called *The China Card* that imagined Zhou Enlai secretly enlisting a young Nixon aide to bring about the reconciliation between the countries.[37] And in the 1991 movie *Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country*, set in the distant future, Mr. Spock of the planet Vulcan tries to convince Captain Kirk of the Starship Enterprise to make peace with old enemies. "There is an old Vulcan proverb," Spock counsels. "'Only Nixon could go to China.'"[38]

Praising Nixon's global expertise did not always mean downplaying Tricky Dick. Many establishment types who championed Nixon's statesman image were in no hurry to forget Watergate. A common way to reconcile the two personae was to call Nixon a "tragic" figure, to see his life as "the stuff of Shakespeare," as his former aide David Gergen wrote.[39] The stress on the tragic was meant to honor Nixon's complexity, to suggest that a disaster like Watergate was bound to occur under Nixon since the same white-hot resentment that fueled his rise also led him to abuse his power. But the "tragic" and "Shakespearean" labels, if intended to deepen the understanding of Nixon, ultimately served to simplify his image, reducing deeply embedded traits to surface foibles. Instead of a true "tragic flaw" that was constitutive of Nixon's character—his amorality, paranoia, vindictiveness, or ambition—his flaw was now seen as some minor shortcoming that just happened to trip him up. Talk of Nixon's tragic nature thus bolstered the notion of the statesman, giving him more credit than he deserved.

Nonetheless, to conclude that Nixon's statesman image was triumphant would be an error. Many of these renderings of Nixon's diplomacy, after all, were far from flattering. The Nixon of Sellars's opera, for ex-

ample, was no wise man but another variant of Tricky Dick, bent on swaying history's judgment. Notably, too, scholarly opinion in these years also grew more critical of Nixon's diplomacy.[40] More to the point, the notion that Nixon had returned to a position of actual influence always rested on a shaky premise. To be sure, the mandarins of the foreign-policy establishment liked dining with him in his Upper East Side townhouse or his manse in suburban New Jersey, and sitting presidents took his calls. But Nixon was never asked to take on special diplomatic tasks in his twilight years, as Jimmy Carter has been. Scholars showed scant interest in the content of Nixon's opinions, which had minuscule impact. His books and articles, though voluminous, never provoked intellectual discussion, as would those of a thinker such as Samuel Huntington, Francis Fukuyama, or even Henry Kissinger—only water-cooler chitchat. To the extent that Nixon's policy pronouncements attracted interest, it had little to do with the pronouncements and almost everything to do with Nixon, who as the most enigmatic leader of recent times exerted a continuing fascination. "We are suckers for a good show," explained Robert G. Kaiser of *The Washington Post* ten years after Watergate, calling Nixon's journey "America's longest-running soap opera," filled with "pathos, bathos, intrigue, surprise."[41] People wanted to hear him because he was America's chief villain, the only president to resign, or (at best) because he was a figure of bewitching inscrutability, but not because they expected—or wanted—him to solve the world's ills. Nixon himself accepted this fact. Of his audiences, he told *Newsweek*, "They're here because they want to hear what I have to say, but they're [also] here because they say, 'What makes this guy tick?'"[42]

What was more, the constant focus on the idea of comeback, ironically, revealed it to be a will-o'-the-wisp. For in virtually all the stories announcing Nixon's return, Michael Schudson has written, "rehabilitation, not Richard Nixon, became even more prominently the main subject for public discussion of Nixon."[43] Journalists profiled the former president as an elder statesman often, but just as often they framed these stories as tales of Nixon's battle to replace Watergate's legacy with that of China and détente. In such a context, Watergate and the flight from it remained central, if submerged, themes of Nixon's late career. The president's rehabilitation drama thus revealed not so much a New Nixon as the pertinacity of the Old Nixon, as keen as ever to win history's favor.

Nixon realized his efforts achieved limited gains. After he published *In the Arena*, his third memoir, in 1990, he groused to his assistant Monica Crowley that reviewers dwelled exclusively on the material about Watergate. "None of the other stuff in there, like on the Russians or the other personal stuff, made it into the news or even the reviews," he sighed. "Watergate—that's all anyone wants."[44]

Nixon as Liberal

A third image of Nixon that challenged his darker identities was one that neither he nor his critics ever would have predicted in his lifetime: the notion of Nixon as the last big-government liberal. Decades after his resignation, many historians who looked back on his policies began to argue that his real legacy lay not so much in Watergate as in his contribution to the Great Society: proposing a guaranteed minimum income, establishing the Environmental Protection Agency, desegregating Southern schools, embracing Keynesian economics. Indeed, by the twenty-fifth anniversary of his abdication, this notion had gained a place in the public discourse. A *Washington Post* columnist commemorated Nixon's departure from office by noting his progressive environmental record and spending on social services.[45] *U.S. News & World Report* rhapsodized about Nixon's farsighted policies toward American Indians, worker safety, and the arts.[46] Even Nixon's old adversary Daniel Schorr saluted "the other Nixon" who fought hunger and bequeathed a legacy of desegregated schools.[47]

The pundits' commentary rested on a bed of recent historical scholarship that delved into Nixon's domestic policies and judged them surprisingly substantive. For example, historian Melvin Small published *The Presidency of Richard Nixon*, which included chapters arguing the case for the president as a reformer. A synthesis of Nixon scholarship, Small's work capped a decade of other historians' labors along similar lines, notably that of Joan Hoff and Tom Wicker.[48] Quickly, the idea progressed from a challenge to the conventional wisdom about Nixon—a kind of "man bites dog" story with a mischievously contrarian appeal—to a sound-bite repeated so often that it approximated the conventional wisdom itself.

Yet whatever currency it gained in certain quarters, this picture, too, failed to gain dominance. The problem wasn't just that countervailing instances of Nixon's conservative policies abounded alongside his liberal accomplishments. More to the point, the reading of Nixon as a liberal didn't reckon with what "liberal" and "conservative" meant circa 1970, when the political center of gravity in America stood far to the left of where it would be decades later. Nor did it take into account the majorities that the Democrats possessed in Congress during Nixon's presidency, which forced him to tack leftward for his political survival.

Most fatally to their argument, advocates of the liberal Nixon image struck from consideration not only contextual facts about the era but also the very person of Nixon himself. When the biographer Richard Norton Smith reviewed Hoff's *Nixon Reconsidered*, he lamented that "process crowds out personality," and that "in pursuing her vision of Nixon with-

out Watergate, Ms. Hoff comes dangerously close to giving us Nixon without Nixon."[49] The "Nixon as liberal" argument rested on the fallacy that a president's true legacy lay in his policies, not his personality. But as Smith recognized, the ways that people in the past understood the worlds they inhabited—including what they thought about public figures such as the president—constitute, as much as the filigree of policymaking, the proper subjects of history. At a 1987 conference about Nixon that included much discussion of his purported liberalism, the historian Stanley Kutler argued, "We are, to some extent, in danger of forgetting—not forgetting Richard Nixon, but forgetting what he did and what he symbolized to his contemporaries. History is, after all, not just what the present wishes to make of the past for its own purposes. . . . Historians must judge the past by the standards of that past, not their own."[50] In the end, Kutler need not have feared; the notion of Nixon as a liberal never caught hold because it avoided rather than confronted the emotions and associations that Nixon provoked and that in turn defined him.

The Endurance of Tricky Dick

Thus, although Nixon's image remained contested at his death, with new views emerging periodically, his image also remained overwhelmingly negative. The lasting picture was not terribly different from that of August 1974: a dishonest, vindictive political animal whose hunger for approval and resentment of his perceived foes drove him to violate the Constitution and bring about his own fall. Tricky Dick still predominated.

A range of indicators supported this judgment. In political arguments and writings, book reviews, even private conversation, talk of Nixon's statesmanship, victimhood, or progressiveness never superseded his reputation for deceit and manipulation. Anniversaries that recalled his life invariably commemorated the Watergate break-in or his resignation, not any positive achievements of his presidency. Politicians rarely claimed his legacy, and no post-resignation or posthumous honors or laurels accrued to his name. The obituaries led with Watergate and his resignation.

In the realm of quantitative measures, survey numbers showed that most Americans still associated Nixon with corruption and dishonesty. A Gallup poll of March 2002 showed that 54 percent of Americans still "disapproved" of Nixon's performance as president, while 34 percent "approved." The data showed an improvement for Nixon over some previous polls, but he still fared worse than any other president since Kennedy.[51] Polls of historians likewise showed Nixon, despite having modestly bettered his lot in recent years, registering poorly overall. Even conservative scholars evaluated him unfavorably compared to other presidents.[52]

Cultural indicators pointed in a similar direction. Nixon's impact on the language attested to his enduring meaning. "Nixonian" has become a synonym for Machiavellian. The "-gate" suffix, appended like laundry tags to the names of new scandals, demonstrates Watergate's lasting power as the benchmark of political wrongdoing. Nixon going to China has also entered the lexicon as shorthand for playing against type to effect a dramatic political change. But even as it evokes Nixon's creativity and bravura in diplomacy, the phrase also calls to mind his trademark political resourcefulness and untrustworthiness.

Popular culture, too, continues to portray Nixon mostly as a villain, scoundrel, or failed president. The novelist Philip Roth, whose pitch-perfect 1971 satire *Our Gang* had President Trick E. Dixon campaign against Satan for president of Hell,[53] kept Tricky Dick vividly alive in the 1990s in such novels as *American Pastoral* and *I Married a Communist*, in which Nixon represents nothing less than the subversion of American democracy. In the former, the character Lou Levov, watching the Senate Watergate hearings in 1973, figures that if they could just "Get Nixon," then "America will be America again, without everything loathsome and lawless that's crept in, without all this violence and malice and madness and hate. . . . Cage the crook!"[54] In the latter novel, Murray Ringold, a survivor of the Red Scare, looses a frenetic tirade against what he calls the "barely endurable" spectacle of Nixon's funeral, railing against "the man who turned a whole country's morale inside out, the generator of an enormous national disaster, the first and only president of the United States of America to have gained from a handpicked successor a full and unconditional pardon for all the breaking and entering he committed while in office."[55] Less well-known, Mark Maxwell's 1998 novel *Nixon-Carver* presented Nixon's life story as if recounted by minimalist short-story writer Raymond Carver, using staples from the psychobiographical literature on Nixon for satiric and dramatic effect.[56]

Low culture matched high culture in suggesting that Nixon's darker images were the ones that elicited public response. On the prime-time cartoon show *The Simpsons*, Nixon appears frequently as an emblem of political wrongdoing. In one episode, Homer told Bart that Checkers went to doggy hell; on another, Moe the Bartender used an Enemies List to plot acts of revenge. "If you would have told me 25 years ago that I'd be making a living by making fun of Richard Nixon, I would have been so happy," said the show's creator, Matt Groening. The singer James Taylor, in a song called "Line 'Em Up," recalled even Nixon's tearful resignation speech as a contrived act: "I remember Richard Nixon back in '74/And the final scene at the White House door/And the staff lined up to say good-bye/Tiny tear in his shifty little eye." In film, Oliver Stone's 1994 movie *Nixon* dredged up the conspiratorial president of New Left

iconography,[57] Andrew Fleming's 1999 *Dick* showed a malevolent, if incompetent, schemer undone by two ditzy teenage girls, and Niels Mueller's *The Assassination of Richard Nixon* used the president to embody all that was bleak and corrupt in 1970s America.[58]

The Comeback Artist, or the New Nixon as Old Nixon

If one conception of Nixon might be said to have carried equal weight to Tricky Dick in American memory, it is that of the comeback artist. Nixon's tenacity in trying to become again a player "in the arena," as he liked to say, recurred as a theme throughout both positive and negative portraits. The most requested Nixon item from the National Archives, and the best-selling image at the Nixon Library and souvenir shops, was a photograph of Nixon and Elvis on the occasion of the rock star's visit to the White House in December 1970 (it even inspired a small corpus of kitsch, including a novel and a made-for-cable-TV movie).[59] Apart from its incongruousness, the photograph was compelling because it captured two iconic American comeback artists in full glory. Like the late-career Elvis, Nixon elicited, along with the easy ridicule, a grudging regard for his perseverance—a recognition that he had made a difference in an era of politicians who seemed small and insignificant.

Indeed, in all the streams of commentary about Nixon after his death, whether critical of his cynicism or admiring of his grit, a common theme held that his reinventions showed a determination to stay relevant. In fact, the blanket awareness of his labors proved not that he had "come back" but the reverse: that everyone remained acutely aware of his resolve to control how others would perceive him. The comeback artist, on close inspection, turned out to be a close cousin of the old political manipulator. Even at his funeral, Nixon was, as *New York* magazine put it, "spinning from his grave."[60] Again he was trying to refashion his public persona, to fight for rehabilitation, to roll out this year's model of the new Nixon. Alas, whether it was new or used, this time around most Americans weren't buying.

Notes

[1] John Herbers, *No Thank You, Mr. President* (New York, 1976), 36.

[2] Paul Johnson, "In Praise of Richard Nixon," *Commentary* (October 1988): 50.

[3] Quoted in Fawn M. Brodie, *Richard M. Nixon: The Shaping of His Character* (New York, 1981), 306.

[4] Robert K. Murray and Tim H. Blessing, "The Presidential Performance Study: A Progress Report," *Journal of American History* 70, no. 3 (December 1983): 535–55, 543; Reuven Frank, *Out of Thin Air: The Brief Wonderful Life of Network News* (New York, 1991), 339; David Wallechinsky, Irving Wallace, and Amy Wallace, *The Book of Lists* (New York, 1977), 1; Michael Korda, *Another Life: A Memoir of Other People* (New York, 1999), 462.

[5] Theodore H. White, *The Making of the President, 1972* (New York, 1973), 18; *New York Times*, August 19, 1974, 29; Joan Hoff, *Nixon Reconsidered* (New York, 1994), 346; Herbert Parmet,

Richard Nixon and His America (Boston, 1990), 620–46; Melvin Small, *The Presidency of Richard Nixon* (Lawrence, KS, 1999), 311.

[6] Stephen E. Ambrose, *Nixon: The Triumph of a Politician, 1962–1972* (New York, 1989), 314.

[7] Stephen Whitfield, "Richard Nixon as a Comic Figure," *American Quarterly* 37, no. 1 (Spring 1985): 116.

[8] Earl Mazo, *Richard Nixon: A Political and Personal Portrait* (New York, 1959), 136.

[9] Quoted in Ronald Steel, *Walter Lippmann and the American Century* (Boston, 1980), 589.

[10] Bruce Mazlish, *In Search of Nixon* (New York, 1972), 74.

[11] Henry Spalding, *The Nixon Nobody Knows* (Middle Village, NJ, 1972); Gary Allen, *Richard Nixon: The Man Behind the Mask* (Boston, 1971); Bela Kornitzer, *The Real Nixon* (New York, 1960).

[12] William Appleman Williams, "Excelsior!" *New York Review of Books* 18 (February 24, 1972): 7–12.

[13] For this larger study, see my *Nixon's Shadow: The History of an Image* (New York, 2003), from which parts of this essay are derived.

[14] See Michael Schudson, *Watergate in American Memory* (New York, 1992) and Thomas J. Johnson, *The Rehabilitation of Richard Nixon: The Media's Effect on Collective Memory* (New York, 1995).

[15] See, for example, the works cited by Mazo, *Richard Nixon*, as well as Eleanor Harris, "The Nixons," *American Weekly*, August 24, 1952, 4–5; Lawrence Wright, "Why We Liked Dick," *Washington Monthly*, December 1986, 17–20; James Keogh, *This Is Nixon* (New York, 1956); Ralph de Toledano, *Nixon* (New York, 1960); and Irwin F. Gellman, *The Contender: Richard Nixon, The Congress Years, 1946–1952* (New York, 1999).

[16] *Washington Times-Herald*, January 21, 1947.

[17] Exemplifying the liberals' outlook, William V. Shannon of the *New York Post* wrote of Nixon in 1955, "The prestige of his participation in the unmasking of Alger Hiss for example is untarnished and not in dispute, but he cannot live on that forever." Liberal criticism of Nixon's role in the Hiss case arose mainly after he became vice-president. He scarcely appears in the books on the Hiss case written before then. And although it's certainly true that Nixon engaged in some nasty Red-baiting during his 1946 congressional race against Jerry Voorhis, most of the accounts of it and the harsh words for Nixon appeared only later after he had already earned the enmity of many critics, who then reexamined his past in search of the origins of his dark side.

[18] See, for example, Richard J. Donovan, "Birth of a Salesman," *The Reporter*, October 14, 1952; Richard Rovere, "Nixon: Most Likely to Succeed," *Harper's*, September 1955; Americans for Democratic Action, *Nixon: The Second Man* (pamphlet), 1956; William Lee Miller, "The Debating Career of Richard M. Nixon," *The Reporter*, April 19, 1956; Irving Howe, "Poor Richard Nixon," *The New Republic*, May 7, 1956; Gene Marine, "What's Wrong with Nixon," *Nation*, August 18, 1956; August Hecksher, "The Future of 'The Party of the Future': The Nixon Problem Is Not Yet Settled," *The Reporter*, September 20, 1956; Morris H. Rubin, "The Trouble With Nixon: A Documented Report," *The Progressive*, October 1956; William Costello, *The Facts About Nixon: An Unauthorized Biography* (New York, 1960); Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *Kennedy or Nixon: Does It Make Any Difference*? (New York, 1960); and Herbert Block, *Herblock Special Report* (New York, 1974).

[19] The nickname was actually first affixed during his 1950 Senate race against Helen Gahagan Douglas.

[20] Quoted in Gary Paul Gates, *Air Time: The Inside Story of CBS News* (New York, 1979), 320.

[21] Quoted in Joseph C. Spear, *Presidents and the Press: The Nixon Legacy* (Cambridge, MA, 1984), 191.

[22] In addition to Spear, see, for example, William L. Rivers, *The Adversaries: Politics and the Press* (Boston, 1970); Fred Powledge, *The Engineering of Restraint: The Nixon Administration*

and the Press (Washington, DC, 1971); James Aronson, *Deadline for the Media: Today's Challenges to Press, TV and Radio* (Indianapolis, 1972); William J. Small, *Political Power and the Press* (New York, 1972); David Wise, *The Politics of Lying: Government Deception, Secrecy and Power* (New York, 1973); Lewis W. Wolfson, ed., *The Press Covers Government: The Nixon Years from 1969 to Watergate* (Washington, DC, 1973); Timothy Crouse, *The Boys on the Bus* (New York, 1973); William E. Porter, *Assault on the Media* (Ann Arbor, MI, 1976); Michael Baruch Grossman and Martha Joynt Kumar, *Portraying the President* (Baltimore, 1981); Marilyn Lashner, *The Chilling Effect in TV News: Intimidation by the Nixon White House* (New York, 1984); and John Anthony Maltese, *Spin Control: The White House Office of Communications and the Management of Presidential News* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1992).

[23] Besides the works cited above by Brodie and Mazlish, see also, for example, Bruce Mazlish, "Towards a Psychohistorical Inquiry: The 'Real' Richard Nixon," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 1 (Autumn 1970), reprinted in *The Leader, the Led and the Psyche: Essays in Psychohistory* (Hanover, NH, 1990), 198–246; Michael Rogin and John Lottier, "The Inner History of Richard Milhous Nixon," *Transaction* 9, 1–2 (November-December 1971): 21; James David Barber, *The Presidential Character: Predicting Performance in the White House* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1972); Arthur Woodstone, *Nixon's Head* (New York, 1972); Eli S. Chesen, *President Nixon's Psychiatric Profile: A Psychodynamic-Genetic Interpretation* (New York, 1973); Alan B. Rothenberg, "Why Nixon Taped Himself," *Psychoanalytic Review* 62, no. 2 (Summer 1975): 201–23; Leo Rangell, "Lessons from Watergate: A Derivative for Psychoanalysis," *Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 45, no. 1 (1976): 37–61; David Abrahamsen, *Nixon vs. Nixon: An Emotional Tragedy* (New York, 1977); James W. Hamilton, "Some Reflections on Richard Nixon in the Light of His Resignation and Farewell Speeches," *Journal of Psychohistory* 4, no. 4 (Spring 1977): 491–511; Steven R. Brown, "Richard Nixon and the Public Conscience: The Struggle for Authenticity," *Journal of Psychohistory* 5, no. 4 (Spring 1978): 93–111; James P. Johnson, "Nixon's Use of Metaphor: The Real Nixon Tapes," *Psychoanalytic Review* 66, no. 2 (1979): 263–74; Henry W. Lawton, "Milhous Rising," *Journal of Psychohistory* 6, no. 4 (Spring 1979): 519–42; Leo Rangell, *The Mind of Watergate* (New York, 1980); Jules Levey, "Richard Nixon as Elder Statesman," *Journal of Psychohistory* 13, no. 4 (Spring 1986): 27–48; Peter Loewenberg, "Nixon, Hitler and Power: An Ego Psychology Study," *Psychoanalytic Inquiry* 6, no. 1 (1986): 27–48; Blema S. Steinberg, *Shame and Humiliation: Presidential Decision Making on Vietnam* (Pittsburgh, 1996); and Vamik D. Volkan, Norman Itzkowitz, and Andrew W. Dod, *Richard Nixon: A Psychobiography* (New York, 1997).

[24] *Washington Post*, May 21, 1974.

[25] George W. Johnson, ed., *The Nixon Presidential Press Conferences* (New York, 1978), 340–3.

[26] "Is the Press Living by a Double Standard?" *U.S. News & World Report*, October 10, 1977, 29.

[27] Quoted in Jonathan Rieder, *Canarsie: The Jews and Italians of Brooklyn Against Liberalism* (Cambridge, MA, 1985) 159.

[28] Cameron Crowe, "Neil Young: The Last American Hero," *Rolling Stone*, February 8, 1979; David Alpern, "Nixon Speaks," *Newsweek*, May 9, 1977, 25–39.

[29] Len Colodny and Robert Gettlin, *Silent Coup: The Removal of a President* (New York, 1991).

[30] Raymond K. Price, "Nixon's Reassessment Comes Early," in *The Nixon Presidency: Twenty-Two Intimate Perspectives on Richard M. Nixon,* ed. Kenneth W. Thompson (Lanham, MD, 1982), 389.

[31] *Washington Post*, February 25, 1976, A15.

[32] See, among others, Julie Baumgold, "Nixon's New Life in New York," *New York*, June 9, 1980, 24; Jennifer Allen, "Richard Nixon is Making Something of a Comeback," *Manhattan*, January 19, 1981, 1–3; *Wall Street Journal*, July 2, 1981, 1; Tony Fuller, Morton M. Kondracke, and John J. Lindsay, "The Sage of Saddle River," *Newsweek*, May 19, 1986, 32; Michael Beschloss, "How Nixon Came in from the Cold," *Vanity Fair*, June 1992, 114ff.; and Korda, 451–62.

[33] Marvin Kalb, *The Nixon Memo: Political Respectability, Russia, and the Press* (Chicago, 1994).

[34] Quoted in John Stacks and Strobe Talbott, "Paying the Price," *Time,* April 2, 1990.

[35] See Russ Witcher, *After Watergate: Nixon and the Newsweeklies* (Lanham, MD, 2000), and Monica Crowley, *Nixon off the Record* (New York, 1996), and *Nixon in Winter* (New York, 1998).

[36] Quoted in Thomas Monsell, *Nixon on Stage and Screen: The Thirty-Seventh President as Depicted in Films, Television, Plays, and Opera* (Jefferson, NC, 1998), 157.

[37] John Ehrlichman, *The China Card* (New York, 1986).

[38] Nicholas Meyer, dir., *Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country*, Paramount Pictures, 1991.

[39] David Gergen, *Eyewitness to Power* (New York, 2000), 21

[40] See, for example, Hoff, *Nixon Reconsidered*; William P. Bundy, *A Tangled Web: The Making of Foreign Policy in the Nixon Presidency* (New York, 1998); Jeffrey P. Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War* (Lawrence, KS, 1998); and Larry Berman, *No Peace, No Honor: Nixon, Kissinger, and Betrayal in Vietnam* (New York, 2001).

[41] Robert G. Kaiser, "What Power does he Hold over Us?" *Washington Post,* April 5, 1984, C1.

[42] Quoted in Fuller et al., "The Sage of Saddle River," 33.

[43] Schudson, *Watergate*, 194–6.

[44] Quoted in Crowley, *Nixon in Winter*, 286.

[45] *Washington Post*, August 20, 1999, A35.

[46] Michael Barone, "Nixon's America," *U.S. News & World Report*, September 20, 1999, 26.

[47] *Washington Post*, August 7, 1994, C1; *Christian Science Monitor*, August 13, 1999, 11.

[48] Melvin Small, *The Presidency of Richard Nixon* (Lawrence, KS, 1999)**;** Hoff, *Nixon Reconsidered***;** Tom Wicker, *One of Us: Richard Nixon and the American Dream* (New York, 1991)**.**

[49] Richard Norton Smith, "The Nixon Watch Continues," *New York Times Book Review*, October 30, 1994, 9.

[50] Stanley I. Kutler, "Watergate Reexamined: Discussant," in *Watergate and Afterward: The Legacy of Richard M. Nixon*, ed. Leon Friedman and William Levantrosser (Westport, CT, 1992), 35–6.

[51] Gallup poll, March 18–20, 2002. Available from Public Opinion Online at ⟨http://www.publicopiniononline.com⟩. For Nixon, see accession number 0401463. For other presidents, see accession numbers 0401458–65.

[52] On recent surveys of historians, see Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., "The Ultimate Approval Rating," *New York Times Magazine*, December 15, 1996, 46; "C-SPAN Survey of Presidential Leadership," at www.americanpresidents.org/survey/historians.overall.asp; Gary L. Gregg, "Liberals, Conservatives and the Presidency," *The Intercollegiate Review* (Spring 1998): 26–31; and the Federalist Society poll of November 2000, cited in the *Chicago Sun-Times*, November 17, 2000, 5.

[53] Philip Roth, *Our Gang (Starring Tricky and His Friends)* (New York, 1971).

[54] Philip Roth, *American Pastoral* (Boston, 1997), 299–300.

[55] Philip Roth, *I Married a Communist* (Boston, 1998), 277–80.

[56] Mark Maxwell, *NixonCarver: A Novel* (New York, 1998).

[57] Oliver Stone, dir., *Nixon,* Buena Vista, 1995.

[58] Andrew Fleming, dir., *Dick*, Columbia Pictures, 1999.

[59] Jonathan Lowy, *Elvis and Nixon: A Novel* (New York, 2001); Alan Arkush, dir., *Elvis Meets Nixon*, Showtime, 1998.

[60] Jacob Weisberg, "Spinning from His Grave," *New York*, May 9, 1994, 39.

Richard Nixon, 37th president of the United States (1969â€“74), who, faced with almost certain impeachment for his role in the Watergate scandal, became the first American president to resign from office. He was also vice president (1953â€“61) under President Dwight D. Eisenhower. A page for describing UsefulNotes: Richard Nixon. If you could write a Shakespearean tragedy about any United States president, none would be a more viable â€¦Â This resulted in a surprise loss to John F. Kennedy, and while many blamed Nixon's defeat on a combination of bad luck and strategic errors â€” particularly his poor performance in the first presidential debatenote though the perception that he had performed poorly was made by people who watched the debate, which was the first to be televised; people who heard the debate. Nixon took office intending to secure control over foreign policy in the White House. He kept Secretary of State William Rogers and Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird out of the loop on key matters of foreign policy. The instrument of his control over what he called "the bureaucracy" was his assistant for national security affairs, Henry Kissinger. So closely did the two work together that they are sometimes referred to as "Nixinger." Together, they used the National Security Council staff to concentrate power in the White Houseâ€”that is to say, within themselves. Opening to