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Edited and Introduced by Rick Perlstein: Richard Nixon

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Introduction

Rick Perlstein

I

In the fall of 1967 Richard Nixon, reintroducing himself to the public for his second run for the presidency of the United States, published two magazine articles simultaneously. The first ran in the distinguished quarterly *Foreign Affairs*, the review of the Council of Foreign Relations. “Asia after Viet Nam” was sweeping, scholarly, and high-minded, couched in the chessboard abstractions of strategic studies. The intended audience, in whose language it spoke, was the nation’s elite, and liberal-leaning, opinion-makers. It argued for the diplomatic “long view” toward the nation, China, that he had spoken of only in terms of red-baiting demagoguery in the past: “we simply cannot afford to leave China forever outside the family of nations,” he wrote. This was the height of foreign policy sophistication, the kind of thing one heard in Ivy League faculty lounges and Brookings Institution seminars. For Nixon, the conclusion was the product of years of quiet travel, study, and reflection that his long stretch in the political wilderness, since losing the California governor’s race in 1962, had liberated him to carry out. It bore no relation to the kind of rip-roaring, elite-baiting things he usually said about Communists

on the stump in the eleven Republican elections in which he had previously participated.¹

Nixon's second article that fall was published in the nation's most widely read monthly, *Reader's Digest*. The *Digest*, consumed by around twenty million Americans, was the opposite of *Foreign Affairs* in every way: jingoistic, sappy, and as likely as not to identify any given liberal-leaning opinion-maker as a self-serving bamboozler. Nixon's article was called "What Has Happened to America?" and its mood was demagogic, angry, and apocalyptic. Its subject was a summer of deadly race riots that had left "the United States blazing in an inferno of urban anarchy." His solution was a law-and-order crackdown. The riots, the article said, showed that American society had become "among the most lawless and violent in the history of the free peoples," a common sentiment among the conservatives of the day. The argument, however, added a signature Nixonian touch. When it came time to affix blame, he downplayed the role of the rioters. Instead, he blamed the same people who were the intended *audience* for "Asia after Viet Nam": liberal elites. "Our opinion-makers have gone too far in promoting the doctrine that when a law is broken, society, not the criminal, is to blame," he wrote. "Our teachers, preachers, and politicians have gone too far in advocating the idea that each

¹ "Asia after Viet Nam," *Foreign Affairs* 46, no. 1 (October 1967).

individual should determine what laws are good and what laws are bad.”²

Two articles, two audiences, two different messages: that’s politics. Richard Nixon, however, the twentieth century’s quintessential political man, pushed the contradiction yet further. The *Foreign Affairs* essay concluded with a curious metaphor. “Dealing with Red China is something like trying to cope with the more explosive ghetto elements of our own country,” he said. “In each case dialogues have to be opened; in each case aggression has to be restrained while education proceeds; and, not least, in neither case can we afford to let those now self-exiled from society to stay exiled forever. We have to proceed with both an urgency born of necessity and a patience born of realism, moving by calculated steps toward the final goal.” Of course, “dialogue” and “education” were the liberal opinion-making elites’ prescriptions for what to do about “the most explosive ghetto elements of our country”—not what conservative Republicans would call for. In the service of selling liberals his foreign policy vision, he was willing to ventriloquize their script.

The trope of the “two Nixons” has been a staple of commentary about the man since the 1950s. Pundits tended to understand the problem serially:

² “What Has Happened to America?” *Reader’s Digest*, October 1967.

they would announce that they detected a new-found maturity in the demagogue they had called “Tricky Dick,” now making sound, nuanced, and humane contributions to the public debate; then, like clockwork, he would start talking about “anarchy” and blame it all on the liberal elites. And the pundits would announce in rueful tones that the “old Nixon” had returned—and then the cycle (“Is there a ‘new Nixon?’”) would repeat itself a few years later. The pundits never got it quite right. Richard Nixon was driven by a consistent passion to make sound, nuanced, and humane contributions to public debate. And he also, and at the same time, inhabited a mental world, as his arch-foe Adlai Stevenson would put it, of “slander and scare,” of “smash and grab and anything to win.” This part of him was driven by an unstinting rage for control, a need to dominate and even humiliate opinion-making elites—whom he also saw as architects not merely of society’s moral degradation, but of the political humiliation of Richard Nixon.³

A day in the life of Richard Nixon was never either/or when it came to this bifurcated orienta-

³ Fawn Brodie, *Richard Nixon: The Shaping of His Character* (New York: Norton, 1981), 312, 327, 356–58. For Nixon’s youth generally, see Renée K. Schulte, ed., *The Young Nixon: An Oral Inquiry* (Fullerton: California State University, Fullerton, Oral History Program, 1978).

tion; it was always both/and. He needed elites, and hated them; he hated elites, and wanted to be accepted among them. He could be open-minded and open-hearted, and he could rage for control. It had always been so, even before his political career began, and even until his political career was ended. To many Americans—who also simultaneously revered and resented elites—it was the soul of his political appeal.

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Richard Milhous Nixon was born on a winter day in 1913 “in a house,” as he put it sonorously in his 1978 memoirs, “my father built.” The little plaster-frame cottage—you can still visit it at the Richard Nixon Library and Birthplace in Yorba Linda, California—was across from a new irrigation ditch that promised for the first time to make good on the Chamber of Commerce boast that this desert outpost was a good place to grow citrus. For the children of this cactus-covered town it made for a bit of fun: they could swim in it, or at least wade in it. All except the Nixon boys. When Frank Nixon saw his boys in the canal, he would grab them by the scruff of the neck, haul them out, push them in, taunt them, then throw them in a few more times. One of Richard Nixon’s biographers, reflecting upon the image, speculated a kid

“might well have felt that his father was trying to drown him like an unwanted puppy.”⁴

For most farmers that ditch helped bring a decent crop. Not Frank Nixon, who was filled with the kind of self-destructive abstemiousness that is sometimes labeled pride. “I won’t buy fertilizer until I raise enough lemons to pay for it,” he said, though in Yorba Linda’s “loaf-sugar” soil—it tended to clump—you couldn’t grow lemons without fertilizer. Frank and his family went bust. California wasn’t supposed to be like this.⁵

Frank Nixon was a tempestuous man who loved to argue, even to the point of driving much-needed custom from the grocery store and gas station he built in a former church. The store did well nonetheless, and for a time the family nestled comfortably within the 1920s middle class. Richard Nixon would ever vacillate between feelings of pride and feelings of shame toward his dirty-necked, lusty spitfire of a father, between apologizing for him and boasting about him, between desperately reaching for success to honor him and desperately reaching for success to repudiate him. Frank Nixon was also his son’s mentor in his schoolboy debating career. Dick won often, though his high school coach bemoaned his “abil-

⁴ Richard Nixon, *RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1978), 3; Brodie, *Richard Nixon*, 40.

⁵ Leonard Lurie, *The Running of Richard Nixon* (New York: Coward, McGann, and Geoghegan, 1972), 29.

ity to kind of slide around an argument instead of meeting it head on.”⁶

His mother, Hannah, Nixon famously put it in his farewell address after he resigned the presidency in disgrace, “was a saint.” She was a soft-spoken and devout Quaker, but there was one subject upon which she didn’t always tell the truth: her second son, Richard. The family’s superstar, the one on whom the family hopes had been pinned, was the first son, Harold, who was graceful and loquacious, where Richard was an awkward loner. Harold came down with tuberculosis, and Hannah took him to recuperate in the hot, dry air of Prescott, Arizona. That required setting up a second household, during the Depression, which almost bankrupted the family. Then Nixon’s youngest brother died in a freak accident for which Richard seemed to hold himself accountable. When Harold died, Hannah told an interviewer, Richard “sank into a deep, impenetrable silence. . . . From that time on it seemed that he was trying to be three sons in one, striving even harder than before to make up to his father and me for our loss.”⁷

For her part, Hannah Nixon would come to recast Richard in her mind as an impregnable figure of destiny, a bringer of miracles. She would later

⁶ Brodie, *Richard Nixon*, 40.

⁷ Lurie, *Running of Richard Nixon*, 22.

tell interviewers that Richard had been born the day of an eclipse (he wasn't), and that his ragged and forlorn family had sold land upon which oil was found immediately afterward (they hadn't). This family was a churning stewpot of shame and stubborn pride, haunted by a sense of unearned persecutions, ever convinced they were better than what the world would let them be.⁸

As a schoolboy he hadn't a single close friend, preferring to cloister himself with a book up in the former church's bell tower, hating to ride the school bus because he thought the other children smelled bad. His brilliance and awesome application won him a scholarship to Harvard. But he could afford only to stay home and attend Whittier, a fine little Quaker college unknown anywhere else. There, Nixon came into his own socially, but in a peculiarly Nixonian fashion. One biographer described a cartoon of seniors in the Whittier yearbook "lounging informally, talking and laughing. . . . Nixon at the very center . . . but while the rest are clearly enjoying themselves, Richard stands alone, neatly dressed, completely devoid of emotion—solemnly dominating the group, but not part of it." That image provides a template for understanding his political career.⁹

Finding himself excluded from Whittier College's single social club, the Franklins, this most

⁸ Brodie, *Richard Nixon*, 35.

⁹ Lurie, *Running of Richard Nixon*, 27.

unfraternal of youth organized the remnant into a fraternity of his own. Franklins were well-rounded, graceful; they moved smoothly, talked slickly. Nixon's new club, the Orthogonians, was for the strivers, the commuter students, those not to the manor born. Forever more, Nixon would gather together those who believed themselves put upon by the sophisticates, setting himself up as both one of them and apart from them—their leader. For instance, he surprised those who spotted him as an up-and-comer by seeking out a berth on the House un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), a collection of poltroons widely seen to have permanently humiliated themselves with the Hollywood Ten circus; then he engineered his investiture as its most respected voice. His famous “Checkers” speech of 1952, fighting to preserve his place as General Dwight D. Eisenhower's vice presidential candidate against charges he had an improper campaign fund, rocketed him to a new plateau of popularity because of his success in speaking as an everyman put upon by an aloof and arrogant boss. He misquoted Lincoln: “God must have loved the common people—he made so many of them.”¹⁰

¹⁰ Chris Matthews, *Kennedy and Nixon: The Rivalry That Shaped Postwar America* (New York: Free Press, 1997), 24–25; Brodie, *Richard Nixon*, 113–15; Tom Wicker, *One of Us: Richard Nixon and the American Dream* (New York: Random House, 1991), 80–11; Brodie, *Richard Nixon*, 271–89.

Those who felt themselves condescended to by the sophisticates were everywhere in the majority. They formed an excellent constituency for a political career. In 1969, in one of his most famous speeches, he gave this abstraction a permanent name: the “Silent Majority.”

III

America’s liberals saw themselves as the tribunes of the common people, Republicans as enemies of the common people. *Liberals* had been the ones to write the New Deal social and labor legislation that let ordinary Americans win back a measure of economic security during the Depression. *Liberals* had led the war against fascism, World War II, a war conservatives opposed. They had been the architects of the postwar consumer economy that built the first mass middle class in world history. But by the 1950s history caught them in a bind: via the boom they helped build, ordinary laborers were comfortable enough to entertain appeals from Republicans styling themselves as tribunes of the common man. The “Checkers” in the Checkers speech referred to Nixon’s absurd implication that his persecutors were demanding he return the “little cocker spaniel dog” a supporter had sent his little girls as a gift—a red herring to deflect attention from the very specific financial charges at hand. The idea that a maudlin appeal

to sentiment could trump ordinary people's recognition of the "real" economic issues at hand drove his ideological adversaries around the bend.¹¹

The ensuing debate over Richard M. Nixon would track the main contours of America's political divisions to this day. "The man who the people of the sovereign state of California believed was actually representing them" was actually "the pet and protégé of a special interest group of rich Southern Californians," one liberal paper editorialized of the Checkers speech. The pundit Walter Lippmann called it "the most demeaning experience my country has ever had to bear." The in-house humorist of Stevensonian liberalism, Mort Sahl, suggested a sequel. Nixon could read the Constitution aloud to his two daughters; Pat, his wife, could sit within camera view, gazing lovingly upon him while knitting an American flag.¹²

But liberals' hatred of him as a phony populist didn't start with Checkers. Under the tutelage of Murray Chotiner, a cutthroat California political operative whose legal specialty was defending bookies, Nixon learned a uniquely nasty cam-

¹¹ David Greenberg, *Nixon's Shadow: The History of an Image* (New York: Norton, 2004), chapter 2.

¹² Frank Mankiewicz, *Perfectly Clear: Nixon from Whittier to Watergate* (New York: Quadrangle Books, 1973), 63; Stanley Kutler, *The Wars of Watergate: The Last Crisis of Richard Nixon* (New York: Norton, 1992), 34; David Broder and Stephen Hess, *The Republican Establishment: The Present and Future of the GOP* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 152.

paigned style that specialized in turning economic populists out of office with the message that they were actually feckless aristocrats, selling out America to her enemies. For his first campaign, in 1946, he framed his opponent, the well-bred Jerry Voorhis, as a handmaiden of Communists even though Voorhis had proposed a bill outlawing the American Communist Party. In 1950, running for Senate, he called his opponent Helen Gahagan Douglas (a sophisticate married to Hollywood leading man Melvyn Douglas) “pink right down to her underwear”—and sent out 500,000 fliers, printed on pink paper, tying her to “the notorious Communist party-line Congressman from New York” Vito Marcantonio. Upon his victory, the senator-elect attended a chic Georgetown party hosted by columnist Joseph Alsop. W. Averell Harriman, son of a railroad baron and a distinguished ambassador who had traveled to California that campaign season to help Helen Gahagan Douglas, was announced. He spied Nixon, and, turning on his heels, barked: “I will not break bread with that man!”¹³

Nixon had an explanation for the sophisticates’ contempt, and it had nothing to do with his campaign style: they hated him for beating Alger Hiss.

¹³ Wicker, *One of Us*, 33–45; Greg Mitchell, *Tricky Dick and the Pink Lady: Richard Nixon vs. Helen Gahagan Douglas—Sexual Politics and the Red Scare, 1950* (New York: Random House, 1990).

Hiss had been a legendarily distinguished public servant and protégé of some of the most distinguished men in the Washington Establishment. At a HUAC hearing in 1948, a disheveled and strange *Time* magazine staffer and Communist apostate named Whittaker Chambers accused Hiss of having been a secret Communist. Hiss demanded time before the committee to clear his name. Well-dressed, well-bred, and well-spoken, Hiss so convincingly voiced his claim that he hadn't known "Whittaker Chambers" that HUAC was prepared to drop the matter. Only Richard Nixon objected. Tipped off by freelance anti-Communist investigators, he had noticed a hole in his testimony: Hiss had never said he hadn't known Chambers. He had just said he hadn't known a man *named* Whittaker Chambers.¹⁴

Exhibiting the obsessive work ethic that marked his career, Nixon established a record that rendered the notion that the two had not known each other virtually impossible. And yet Hiss, nailed dead to rights, arrogantly stuck to his story. And maddeningly, his Establishment sponsors kept defending him—insinuating that *Chambers* was the villain. President Truman called the case a "red herring." Chambers, an apocalyptic man, thought he knew why: Communists in high places

¹⁴ Sam Tanenhaus, *Whittaker Chambers: A Biography* (New York: Random House, 1997).

were pulling strings behind the scenes. Richard Nixon harbored the more prosaic theory a lifetime of resentments had prepared him for: the Establishment was protecting one of their own.

The case became a national soap opera, dragging on for years—a 1940s media equivalent of the O. J. Simpson trial, or the Monica Lewinsky scandal. In one unforgettable twist, Chambers produced clinching evidence—State Department documents on spools of microfilm—from a hollowed-out pumpkin on his farm. Finally, on January 25, 1950, like Al Capone being put away for tax evasion, Hiss was sentenced to five years in federal prison for perjury. The second-term Congressman found himself promoted, in a weak and leaderless Republican Party, as a debating partner of the Democratic president. And in a monumental special order House speech that effectively launched his Senate campaign, Nixon assimilated the Hiss case’s “Lessons for the American People” to his favorite narrative: the swells putting one over on the plain people, loosing anarchy upon the land.

Forever more, Richard Nixon would remain convinced that the swells would never forgive him for finding them out. As he put it rather fantastically in the conclusion to his epic eighty-three-page account of the Hiss case in his 1962 book *Six Crises*: “For the next twelve years of my public service in Washington, I was to be subjected to an

utterly unprincipled and vicious smear campaign. Bigamy, forgery, drunkenness, thievery, anti-Semitism, perjury, the whole gamut of misconduct in public office, ranging from unethical to downright criminal activities—all these were among the charges that were hurled against me, some publicly and others through whispering campaigns that were even more difficult to counteract.”¹⁵

In fact he provided plenty more organic reasons for his critics to hate him. Running for vice president, he assailed Secretary of State Dean Acheson for his “color blindness, a form of pink eye toward the communist threat in United States”; Democratic nominee Adlai Stevenson for his “Ph.D. from Dean Acheson’s College of Cowardly Communist Containment”; and Acheson, Stevenson, and President Truman for having become “traitors to the high principles in which many of the nation’s Democrats believe.” In 1954, in his biannual role as tireless itinerant campaigner for Republican congressional candidates, he said that the new Republican White House occupants had “found in the files a blueprint for socializing America” and claimed possession of “a secret memorandum of the Communist party” proving “it is determined to conduct its program within the Democratic Party.”¹⁶

¹⁵ Richard Nixon, *Six Crises* (New York: Doubleday, 1962), 82.

¹⁶ Greenberg, *Nixon’s Shadow*, 109, 120; Brodie, *Richard Nixon*, 313–15, 329.

In 1956, the Republican ticket again featured Nixon despite the Republican Establishment's revived attempt to get him dumped. President Eisenhower had recently suffered a heart attack, so Adlai Stevenson concentrated his second presidential campaign almost exclusively against the horror that Nixon would become president. "As a citizen more than a candidate," he said, "I recoil at the prospect of Mr. Nixon as a custodian of this nation's future, as guardian of the hydrogen bomb." And "Our nation stands at a fork in the political road. In one direction lies a land of slander and scare; the land of sly innuendo, the poison pen, the anonymous phone call and hustling, pushing, shoving; the land of smash and grab and anything to win. This is Nixonland. America is something different."¹⁷

Of course, however, insinuating that your opponent would nuke the planet was also slander and scare, and spared not the innuendo. Adlai Stevenson had coined a useful word: Nixonland. But it more accurately describes a two-sided engagement. The first group, Stevenson's, took it as axiomatic that if Richard Nixon's values triumphed, America was done for. The second, Nixon's, took it as axiomatic that if Adlai Stevenson's values triumphed, America was done for. Once

¹⁷ Greenberg, *Nixon's Shadow*, 62; John Kenneth Galbraith, *A Life in Our Times: Memoirs* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981), 346.

again, as with Checkers, the confrontation helped determine the contours of the “red” versus “blue” political world we know now.

IV

That other Richard Nixon, the nuanced foreign policy guru, was not AWOL during these years. He came into maturity. The dominant pre-World War II foreign policy tradition on the Republican right was isolationism. Traces of isolationist distrust survived in conservatives’ approach to the Cold War—especially in their opposition to alliances like the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and aid programs like the Marshall Plan. Richard Nixon, to the dismay of his conservative constituents, decisively broke with this tradition.

Some trace it to his experience as the only House freshman to travel to Europe with the congressional study committee that helped frame the Marshall Plan. But the boyhood *National Geographic* reader—“All through grade school my ambition was to become a railroad engineer,” he wrote in his memoir—had always harbored a cosmopolitan streak. And his proselytization for internationalism was one of the things that made him so attractive to Dwight D. Eisenhower, who had made extinguishing Republican isolationism a major political goal. In 1953, Ike sent his new vice president to survey the hottest new Cold War

flashpoint: Vietnam. Nixon returned to find his stature profoundly enhanced, especially among elite opinion-makers—an important pattern in his political career, these stature-enhancing foreign trips. The following spring he delivered a major address before the nation’s newspaper editors on the complexities of arresting the spread of Communism in Asia. The same man who spoke of Dean Acheson’s College of Cowardly Communist Containment, paradoxically, was well on his way to earning his Achesonian merit badge as a foreign policy sage.¹⁸

It came just in the nick of time. In 1955 Eisenhower had his heart attack. In 1956, given the even chance Nixon might end up president, Ike issued instructions for him to campaign as a statesman fit for the leadership of the Free World—to “give ’em heaven,” instead of giving them hell. The injunction made Nixon supremely uncomfortable. When Eisenhower fell behind in the polls, and Nixon was finally given license to breathe fire, Nixon later reflected, “I felt as if a great weight had been lifted off me.” Nothing more agonized Richard Nixon than to leave a humiliation unanswered.

Eisenhower pulled out a second term; the vice president enhanced his national stature yet more

¹⁸Wicker, *One of Us*, 51–55; Nixon, *RN*, 3; Brodie, *Richard Nixon*, 316.

with two remarkable performances overseas, first in South America, then in the Soviet Union. In Lima, Peru, his party was met by a hail of rocks from a crowd shouting, “Fuera Nixon! Fuera Nixon!” [“Down with Nixon!”], and, occasionally, “Meura Nixon! Meura!” [“Death to Nixon!”]. He got out of his car to shame his attackers, debating them face-to-face. In Caracas, Venezuela, his motorcade was intercepted by a mob attempt on his life. As in Peru, Nixon put his most admirable qualities on fullest display: a refusal to back down under intimidation, and a remarkable calmness in a crisis. As stones sprayed the supposedly shatterproof glass of his limousine, a Secret Service bodyguard reached for his revolver. Nixon decided the sound of gunfire would send the crowd into a frenzy that would make escape impossible. It was the kind of presence of mind for which battlefield commanders win medals. He was handsomely rewarded for his grace under pressure: wherever Nixon went he got standing ovations. For the first time, the Republicans’ presidential nominee—apparent was starting to look, to the Establishment, like presidential timber.¹⁹

Another trip the next year cemented the judgment. Cold War tensions were at a point of relax-

¹⁹ Nixon, *RN*, 177–78; Nixon, *Six Crises*, 183–234; Earl Mazo, *Richard Nixon: A Political and Personal Portrait* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959), 203–46.

ation. The United States was invited to exhibit at a trade fair in Moscow's Skolniki Park, and Nixon traveled to Russia to dedicate the American pavilion. During a ceremonial stroll with Premier Khrushchev, an extraordinary impromptu exchange took shape. Several nights later, what became known as the "Kitchen Debate" ran on TV. Basically, the dialogue consisted of Nixon preaching the glories of the consumer luxuries even the lowliest American steelworker could afford and arguing that economic competition was preferable to nuclear war; Khrushchev, in turn, would affect delight at the Cold War olive branch ("I have to say I cannot recognize my friend Mr. Nixon") and retort that Soviet steelworkers could afford equally nice homes. As a "debate," mediated through awkward translation, it hardly amounted to much (*Khrushchev*: "We have a saying: if you have bedbugs you have to catch one and pour boiling water into the ear." *Nixon*: "We have another saying. This is that the way to kill a fly is to make it drink whiskey"). But by catching up in sour-grapes contradictions the man American audiences had been taught to fear more than any other (first, Khrushchev bragged, "We have such things"; then he disparaged, "They are merely gadgets"), Nixon emerged looking more presidential than ever.²⁰

²⁰ Brodie, *Richard Nixon*, 378–87.

And it was this identity as the seasoned statesman, not the attacker of cultural elites, that Nixon chose to carry into the fight of his life—his 1960 presidential campaign against the more inexperienced John F. Kennedy. Friends advised Nixon to sneak before the public imprecations of his opponent’s unpopular religion, his mendacity on the issue of his health, his loose interpretation of his marriage vows. Instead, Nixon decided to campaign as a gentleman. He would recite the number of meetings he had taken with the president (173), the times he had sat with the National Security Council (217, presiding 26 times), the number of countries he had visited (54), the presidents and prime ministers with whom he had had “extended discussion” (44, plus an emperor and a shah)—adding always, “incidentally,” “I have talked with Khrushchev.” But once more, as in 1956, the plan proved an awkward fit.²¹

Television had played an outsized role in Nixon’s rise. Now it would play an outsized role in his fall. The first presidential debate in the history of television was broadcast from Chicago on Monday, September 26. Nixon came in with a commanding lead in the polls. Posterity remembers his drawn appearance, the five o’clock shadow, his arrogant refusal of makeup, the bead of perspiration that lingered on his lower lip. An

²¹ *Ibid.*, 421.

even greater contribution to his loss might have been the predebate pep talk from his running mate, Henry Cabot Lodge, an Establishmentarian par excellence, who implored him: “Erase the assassin image.” Kennedy opened the debate with a sort of dirty trick. The subject of this first of three debates was supposed to be domestic affairs, but Kennedy came out swinging with a scouring assessment of America’s “struggle with Mr. Khrushchev for survival.” Kennedy then smartly twisted his supposed liability—his inexperience—into an asset, assailing the Republicans as backward, sclerotic, and old, presiding over “the lowest rate of economic growth of any major industrialized society in the world.” Nixon, a stickler for obsessive preparation, wasn’t prepared for this.²²

Under ordinary circumstances he might have reached into his voluminous Red Scare trick bag, perhaps repeating his smear on Adlai Stevenson’s patriotism from 1956 when that Democrat had criticized the Republicans’ economic record: he could have said Kennedy had “attacked with violent fury the economic system of the United States.” Instead he acted like a deer in the headlights. He spent the rest of the evening agreeing with his adversary point by point. For instance, when Kennedy announced a bold new program to provide medical care for the aged. Nixon re-

²² Ibid., 414.

sponded, “We are for programs, in addition, which will see that our medical care for the aged are—is—are much—is much better handled than at the present time”—the present time being that of his own incumbent administration. In the five weeks that followed, Nixon never recovered. The hair’s-breadth loss in his quest to lead the Free World haunted him for the rest of his life. It certainly informed his campaign two years later for governor of California. Aiming at Sacramento, he highlighted his ability to handle Khrushchev. On election eve he made the gaffe of saying he was running for “governor of the United States.”²³

A man who had come within an inch of leading the Free World running for a mere governorship: there was something pathetic in the exercise. Initially he had led the incumbent by sixteen points. Then he was challenged in the Republican primary by a far-right nonentity who still got about a third of the vote; then California’s ascendent Far Right abandoned Nixon in the general election. (They hadn’t trusted Nixon since he had gone on TV to disavow Joseph McCarthy on behalf of the administration in 1954.) The previous Republican governor endorsed the Democrat. Bumper stickers appeared around the state: “Would You Buy A Used Car From This Man?” California would not.

²³ Ibid., 459.

Nixon lost his second election in as many years. He was only forty-nine years old. On election night he was so dejected he was refusing to make a concession speech. Aides talked him into it. It turned out to be the most famous speech in his life—a rambling, barely coherent rant that concluded, famously, “You won’t have Nixon to kick around any more, because, gentlemen, this is my last press conference.” What was even more damaging to his reputation, if that was possible, was what he said next, off microphone, loud enough for *Time*’s reporter to quote: “I gave it to them right in the behind. It had to be said, goddammit. It had to be said.”²⁴

Judged *Time*: “Perhaps he had risen too far too fast. . . . Barring a miracle, his political career ended last week.”

V

Nixon even seemed, for an interval, to take the notion to heart. He moved to New York and cashed in as a corporate lawyer, and made arrangements with a political writer to produce a

²⁴ Joseph Lewis, *What Makes Reagan Run? A Political Profile* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968), 64; Jules Witcover, *The Resurrection of Richard Nixon* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1970), 13–23; “California: Career’s End,” *Time*, November 16, 1962, accessible at <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,829391-2,00.html>.

book on the 1964 presidential election. It would have been his second book; in 1962 he published an impressively introspective memoir entitled *Six Crises*. He wrote it, he said in the preface, on the advice of President Kennedy, who had told him a politician should publish a book because “it tends to elevate him in popular esteem to the respected status of an ‘intellectual.’”²⁵

A new force was rising in the Republican firmament: Barry Goldwater, the Arizona senator drafted to run for president by an insurgent cabal of far-right activists. At first, Kennedy had welcomed the chance to face him. Then, in the spring of 1963, Kennedy embraced the most sweeping civil rights legislation in history. The anti-Kennedy backlash was furious—and gained surprising support in the industrial North. Experts who had been projecting a Kennedy landslide wondered now whether Goldwater, as a stalwart foe of the civil rights bill, might not be able to pick him off. In a poll of Republican leaders, only 3 percent said Nixon would make a good candidate. He was too liberal.²⁶

Everything changed with Kennedy’s assassination, including Richard Nixon’s plans. A national wave of contrition followed the trauma: last

²⁵ Nixon, *Six Crises*, x.

²⁶ Rick Perlstein, *Before the Storm: Barry Goldwater and the Unmaking of the American Consensus* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2001), 204–15.

month's political common sense now seemed a flirtation with something ugly and un-American. A horror at all things labeled "extremist" swept the land. Goldwater's political currency deflated overnight. And for Nixon, the years spent cultivating an image as a middle-of-the-road statesman finally paid political dividends: in Gallup's first postassassination poll, Nixon was Republicans' first choice.²⁷

He spent the first half of 1964 on a kabuki campaign to get himself drafted by acclimation, bidding for Barry Goldwater's supporters. He started spouting right-wing clichés like "Planning an economy eventually ends in planning men's lives," and turned his back on his reputation as a pro-civil rights Republican by delivering a ferocious attack in Cincinnati against black parents who protested school segregation in the urban North by keeping their children out of school for a one-day strike. He followed it with a spring trip to Vietnam, proclaiming upon his return, "There is no substitute for victory." Goldwater's book on foreign policy was called *Why Not Victory?*²⁸

He refused to believe the party insiders who told him that the Goldwater insurgents had the nomination wrapped up. He hired operatives to set up clandestine campaigns to engineer "sponta-

²⁷ Ibid., 253.

²⁸ Ibid., 253, 261–62, 288–89, 298, 310–11, 317–18.

neous” primary upsets, and squandered his necessary reputation as a conciliator between Republican factions when his fingerprints were discovered on a “stop Goldwater” movement in California. He groveled before Goldwater, reassuring him of his undying respect. Then, at a governors’ conference prior to the Republican convention, he announced that if Goldwater’s conservative views weren’t repudiated, a “tragedy” would befall the Republican Party. At a breakfast of Republican governors he opened the floor for questions in the hopes he would be implored to save the party. Reporters learned that the silence that followed lasted a full fifteen seconds.²⁹

At that, he pivoted 180 degrees ideologically for the second time in months. He warmly introduced Goldwater at the convention (though he set up a secret command center just in case he could drum up a last-minute draft). And while every other Republican of national stature chose either to sit out Goldwater’s presidential campaign or to work behind the scenes for Lyndon Johnson, Nixon gave 156 speeches for the doomed ticket in 36 states. Once again the Establishment wrote his obituary, this time in bafflement at his bizarre attempts at conciliation with the conservative faction that had just led the Republican Party over a cliff. “Each of his carefully calculated moves in 1964 was fol-

²⁹ Ibid., 331–32, 353, 358.

lowed only by his own further political destruction,” columnists Rowland Evans and Robert Novak concluded.³⁰

Nixon got the last laugh. He understood what the pundits did not: that the delegates he addressed at the Republican National Convention would be more or less the same group that would choose the 1968 nominee. And that the conservatives had taken over the party from the ground up, and weren’t going away just because Barry Goldwater won only six states. According to party rules, the states that had gone for Goldwater were rewarded with extra delegates, which meant that Southern states would control the nomination in 1968. Quietly but energetically, after Goldwater’s defeat, Nixon began lining up Southern support with assurances a President Nixon would not enforce federal civil rights laws. His most crucial and loyal recruit was South Carolina’s segregationist senator Strom Thurmond. It was the beginning of Nixon’s infamous “Southern Strategy.”³¹

The defining issue in the election—the reason Republicans did so well—was the anti-civil rights backlash. The summer was marked by shocking race riots and debate over a failed bill to outlaw racial discrimination in the sale and rental of hous-

³⁰ Ibid., 388, 390–92; Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, “The Unmaking of a President,” *Esquire*, November 1964.

³¹ Rick Perlstein, *Nixonland: The Rise of a President and the Fracturing of America* (New York: Scribner, 2008), 87–89.

ing. Richard Nixon, campaigning for no fewer than sixty-six Republican congressional candidates, hardly said a word on these issues. He focused on Vietnam. It was an issue, in 1966, whose partisan salience was limited: both parties hosted nearly equal complements of hawks and doves. Nixon's own positions were confusing, shifting from week to week: we should escalate; we should negotiate; we should bomb more; we should pause the bombing; we should pour in troops; pouring in troops would be a scandal; military defeat would bring on World War III. What he was up to was evident only in retrospect.

Nixon retainer Leonard Garment disarmingly revealed in his 1997 memoir what Nixon already then believed about Vietnam: that the war could not be won. Politically, the realization seemed to free him to say just about anything. And what he said at any given moment bore the following pattern: it was the opposite of what President Johnson was saying. The strategy seemed to be to force the president to address Nixon, previously beneath notice, in anger. That way Nixon could play what had been his best political card since the 1940s: positioning himself as a martyr. He would also have been promoted as a Republican spokesman—where only the previous year he had been a Republican irrelevancy. Right on schedule, the week before the election, Johnson blew his stack against Nixon's Vietnam criticism,

delivering what Jules Witcover said was “the most brutal verbal bludgeoning ever administered from the White House by Johnson, or any of the Presidents for that matter, to a leader of the opposition party.” The words testified to Nixon’s astounding political success. Of the sixty-six candidates Nixon campaigned for, forty-four won; proclaimed the *New York Times*, the “political equivalent of the batting championship for the 1966 campaign season went to former Vice President Richard M. Nixon.” In actual fact the Republican sweep had little or nothing to do with Nixon’s interventions—the nationwide anti-civil rights backlash was far more the determining factor. But Nixon was brilliantly successful in reaping the credit—and framing it in his preferred terms.³²

The goat of 1960, 1962, and 1964 was now the leader of the opposition party. By 1967 his only real rival for the nomination was George Romney, the pundits’ favorite. But Romney’s earnest sincerity proved his downfall against a master dissembler. A TV interviewer asked Romney why his position on Vietnam had changed. Romney replied that his original optimism had been a result of the “brainwashing” the generals and diplomatic corps had given him on his first trip to Vietnam. Metaphorically, the observation was sharp; American officials did badly exaggerate the situa-

³² Ibid., 96–166.

tion before visiting dignitaries. Politically it was disastrous: it made Romney sound weak, and American officials sound sinister. The remark effectively finished him—even as Nixon first uttered banalities about Vietnam; then pledged “that new leadership will end the war and win the peace in the Pacific”; then refused to say anything else specific, claiming a refusal to interfere with the president’s prerogative to make foreign policy.³³

The race riots in 1967 were worse than in 1966; in 1968, they were joined by the escalating insurrections of antiwar students. The crime rate was skyrocketing. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert F. Kennedy were assassinated. Nelson Rockefeller from the left and Ronald Reagan from the right presented themselves as the only Republicans who could bring social peace. At the convention, they both tried to peel off enough Nixon support to deny Nixon a first-ballot victory. The delegates held firm for Nixon, even those who considered Ronald Reagan a saint—held in check by Strom Thurmond, whose loyalty Nixon had further cemented by giving him veto power over his running mate. Nixon’s rousing acceptance speech spoke to anxieties over the mounting disorder of the 1960s: he proclaimed that “the first civil right of every American is to be free from domestic violence.” His general election commercials, nearly sublimi-

³³ *Ibid.*, 204–5, 235–36.

nal in their jarring, discordant design, attributed the collapse of law and order to Democratic rule.

The campaign was unprecedented in its discipline and tactical shrewdness: he gave only one or two speeches per day, timed for maximal exposure on the evening news. Another crucial component was the carefully choreographed, televised “town hall meeting,” invented by media adviser Roger Ailes, later the architect of FOX News. In November, he won a three-way race that included the right-wing demagogue George Wallace. It was the most stupendous political comeback in history. Now, with hardly more than 43 percent of the popular vote, a man whose defining trait was a rage to control would have to govern a nation spiraling out of control.³⁴

VI

What kind of president was Richard M. Nixon? On the domestic front, a startlingly indifferent one. He once famously labeled domestic policy “building outhouses in Peoria”;³⁵ he believed such matters took care of themselves, without a president to guide them, and nearly set out to prove it. Later, the laws passed during his adminis-

³⁴ Joe McGinniss, *The Selling of the President* (New York: Penguin, 1970).

³⁵ Richard Reeves, *President Nixon: Alone in the White House* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), 33.

tration, and the bills he attempted to pass, earned Nixon a reputation as a sort of liberal. It would be more accurate to say that he took the path of least resistance, and that the conventional policy wisdom of the day was, simply, liberal. He paid closest attention to domestic policy-making when it involved a political constituency he wanted to punish or reward.

He was sold, for example, on adviser Daniel Patrick Moynihan's idea for a guaranteed minimum income to replace the existing welfare system when Moynihan assured him it would wipe out the social welfare bureaucracy, a Democratic political constituency. (In a strategy meeting for the 1972 election, he proposed sabotaging either its passage or its implementation, either way preserving credit for caring about the poor without doing anything of substance at all.) His federal drug control policies could never have survived in our own conservative era: for heroin addicts, they substituted medical treatment for punishment. Nixon's interest in reform was once again political: he hoped rehabilitating heroin addicts would add up to a lower crime rate in time for his 1972 reelection campaign.³⁶

His policy preferences also indicated a conflicted eagerness to please opinion-making elites.

³⁶ Ibid., 45, 636; Michael Massing, *The Fix: Solving the Nation's Drug Problem* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000).

They praised his establishment of an Environmental Protection Agency, launched with an inspiring speech: “the 1970s absolutely must be the years when America pays its debts to the past by reclaiming the purity of its air, its water, and our living environment. It is literally now or never.” But he shared another opinion of the issue in an Oval Office meeting with auto executives: that environmentalists wanted to “go back and live like a bunch of damned animals.” Throwing conservationists a bone also suited another political purpose: the issue was popular among the same young people who were enraged at him for continuing the Vietnam War. In the end, the EPA was a sort of confidence game. The new agency represented not a single new penny in federal spending for the environment. It did, however, newly concentrate subdepartments previously scattered through the vast federal bureaucracy under a single administrator loyal to the White House—the better to control them.³⁷

Here is the other key to understanding Nixon’s domestic policy, and much else in the Nixon White House besides: its frequent “reorganizations,”

³⁷ *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Richard Nixon, 1970* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1971), doc. 1, available at <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=2446>; Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (New York: De Capo Press, 2002), 30; Reeves, *President Nixon*, 238.

which were actually an argument about executive power—that it should be increased, and controlled directly from the Oval Office. His Domestic Policy Council, for example, established his first year, represented a power-grab from cabinet agencies and other independent bureaucracies; its leadership would fall to his number one political enforcer, John Ehrlichman. A reconfiguration of the entire executive branch followed in his second year. Its not-so-innocent intent was suggested by the fact that its advisory council worked in secret, incinerating their trash in “burn bags” every night. The Interstate Commerce Commission, the Civil Aeronautics Board, the Federal Maritime Administration, the Federal Communications Commission, and the Securities and Exchange Commission were among the bureaucracies slated for merger, fragmentation, reduction, or abolition. Many bipartisan governing boards led by officials with fixed statutory terms Nixon sought to replace with White House agencies with chairmen serving at the pleasure of the president, without senatorial confirmation, their duties deliberately unspecified. When Nixon quietly submitted the plan to Congress, and Congress took no action within sixty days, he announced that Congress’s Inaction allowed his bureaucratic coup to take effect unilaterally.³⁸

³⁸ Ibid., 98–99, 230; Jonathan Schell, *The Time of Illusion* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1975), 103–4; John W. Dean, *Blind*

The domestic issue that commanded the closest attention in the White House followed upon his pledges to Strom Thurmond. Richard Nixon had attended law school in North Carolina, where he had learned, in certain company, to refer to the Civil War as the “War between the States.” When it had been the Republican fashion, he had backed federal civil rights legislation. But he also, his chief of staff Bob Haldeman’s diaries revealed, believed in the genetic inferiority of blacks. His campaign promise to Southern Republicans to waylay federal civil rights enforcement was honored via a complex political pas de deux: public pronouncements about desegregation and equal opportunity alongside sub rosa bureaucratic sabotage, his true intentions signaled to Southern conservatives with his federal judicial appointees.³⁹

Then, his strangest domestic initiative came down like a thunderclap. As the 1972 election year approached, 73 percent disapproved of his handling of the economy. Inflation was pinioning the middle class; the stock market was tanking. The Democrats had a proposed solution on the table: a freeze on wages and prices. The president, over and over, said he would never ask Congress for such a foolhardy thing. The Democrats, think-

Ambition: The White House Years (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1976), 24.

³⁹ Brodie, *Richard Nixon*, 526; Reeves, *President Nixon*, 110; Perlstein, *Nixonland*, 362, 421, 459–60, 463–68.

ing themselves clever, granted the president power to impose the freeze unilaterally; that way, they could accuse him of being callous and hard-hearted when he did not. They misjudged the shallowness of Richard Nixon's ideological convictions. In August of 1971 he gathered his economic team for an extraordinary three-day conclave at Camp David and ordered them to engineer both a wage-and-price control package and a radical restructuring of the anchor of the international monetary system—the “gold window,” agreed to at Bretton Woods in 1944, that let nations exchange U.S. currency for gold at a fixed rate. Federal Reserve chairman Arthur Burns warned of the perils of loosing the American currency from gold, “*Pravda* would write that this was a sign of the collapse of capitalism.” Herb Stein of the Council of Economic Advisers, marveling at the short-term cynicism of the policies they were commanded to effect, said he felt as though they'd been hired as scriptwriters for a TV special. The “image of action” was the important thing, the president told them. Nixon sold the new policy on TV as a rescue of the American economy from “the attacks of international money speculators.”

Politically, the reversion to an ugly old Republican isolationism worked famously: 75 percent of the country polled in favor of his “New Economic Policy”; the Dow charted its biggest one-day gain

in history.⁴⁰ These were not, however, the move's only appeals to Richard Nixon. Since childhood, Nixon had raged against what he could not control. And this was a common denominator of so many of his presidential initiatives, policies, and reorganizations, this "New Economic Policy" among them: the quest for control, even of that which could not be controlled.

VII

Richard Nixon's first bureaucratic reorganization had come during his inauguration parade. He issued National Security Decision Memo 2, which disbanded the group within the State Department that checked and balanced the National Security Council. It heralded an unprecedented concentration of foreign policy deliberation within the White House, where it could be carried out in utter secrecy between himself and his national security adviser Henry Kissinger.⁴¹ Playing the chess game of world diplomacy was the meaning of Nixon's lifetime of sacrifice. It was the reason he had longed to be president in the first place.

No one would have predicted that Nixon and Kissinger would become such close partners. Kissinger, a former Kennedy administration official,

⁴⁰ Allen J. Matusow, *Nixon's Economy: Booms, Busts, Dollars, and Votes* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998).

⁴¹ Reeves, *President Nixon*, 26.

had been adviser to Nixon's greatest party rival, the Republican liberal Nelson Rockefeller. He was Jewish, an intellectual, a Harvard professor—all types that Nixon sorely distrusted. But Kissinger resembled his boss in important respects: he was a brilliant striver, always at the edge of respectability, never quite fully integrated into the councils of the elite, ever counting slights from his Establishment patrons. It helped forge a strange intimacy, a love-hate partnership of unusual intensity. Together, they left the Cold War categories of metaphysical good and evil behind them. Their vision of international order was defined instead by metaphors of control: “balance of power,” “equilibrium,” “structure of peace.”⁴²

The opportunities Nixon's years out of power provided for study, travel, and reflection freed a powerful mind from the imperatives of demagoguery. He began to look, in what would become a stock Nixon phrase, at the “long view.” Communism was no longer monolithic; the Soviet Union was on the verge of strategic parity with the United States and saw China as a rival, not a partner; the booming capitalist economies of Asia would have more to do with checking the spread of revolution in Asia than any American saber

⁴² John Judis, *Grand Illusions: Critics and Champions of the American Century* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1992), 190–224.

rattling; you couldn't export American democracy to the Third World anyway. Balancing nations' interests against one another, vouchsafing stability even at the price of apparent moral inconsistency: this now seemed to him the highest good. His belief that what he was doing was idealistic was signaled by his choice of Oval Office furniture—Woodrow Wilson's desk—and his invocation, in describing his plans, of Mahatma Gandhi, his mother's Quaker pacifism, and the Quaker concept of "peace in the center." Kissinger arrived at the same conclusions coming at the problem from the nineteenth-century European tradition of balance-of-power thought. In words Kissinger scripted for Nelson Rockefeller to deliver on the 1968 campaign trail, Kissinger described the goal thus: in "a subtle triangle with Communist China and the Soviet Union, we can ultimately improve our relations with each, as we test the will for peace of both."⁴³

The rhetoric of peace coincided with manifest cruelties in the implementation. In Nixon's 1967 "Asia after Viet Nam" article he spoke of a "U.S. presence" in Indonesia as "a shield behind which the anti-communist forces found the courage and capacity to stage their counter-coup and, at the final moment, to rescue their country from the Chinese orbit." The "counter-coup," in actual

⁴³ Ibid., 205.

fact, had been a genocide. The hundreds of thousands of victims included not merely Communists and their families but mere ethnic Chinese. As president, Nixon would have occasion to similarly ignore a genocide, by Pakistan against the break-away province later known as Bangladesh. It was 1971, and the White House had secretly “tilted” toward Pakistan in its conflict with India. America was officially neutral in the conflict. But Pakistan’s dictator Yahya Khan was a crucial go-between in Kissinger’s ongoing negotiations of an alliance with China. Wrenching the globe into a more peaceful “balance” could be a damned dirty business.⁴⁴

The opening to China was, if nothing else, an awesome diplomatic accomplishment. It is impossible to overstate the intensity of America’s previous efforts to isolate the nation that had shocked the world by “going Communist” in 1949. A “kitchen debate” in China was unimaginable; as the diplomatic historian Margaret MacMillan relates, “In the early 1960s, when a Chinese classical opera company came to Toronto, the American authorities announced that any American citizens who bought tickets were violating American law.” Nixon called his trip to China in February of 1972—significantly, an election year—“the week that changed the world.” And

⁴⁴ Christopher Hitchens, *The Trial of Henry Kissinger* (New York: Verso, 2001), 44–71.

among the cascading diplomatic consequences of this game-changing development was his visit, several months later, to the Soviet Union, which yielded more tangible results: a Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty, an antiballistic missile treaty, a billion-dollar trade deal.⁴⁵

He fared less successfully in another overriding strategic objective: persuading these two great sponsors of Communist revolution to pressure their North Vietnamese client to end the war. The effort failed because its premises were flawed: for all his foreign policy vision, Nixon could never get beyond the Cold War cliché that China and Russia exercised control over the Communist insurgencies everywhere. But Chinese and Russian sponsorship was only a contributing, never the determinate, factor. The stubborn misunderstanding resembled the account, in his book *Six Crises*, of the mob attacks on him in South America. He figured it as the conspiracy of beady-eyed agitators in communication with Moscow. In reality, Latin Americans—and Vietnamese—had perfectly organic reasons for violent rage at the United States, reasons far beyond Nixon's power to control: America wished to treat them both like semicolonial spheres of influence.

For Richard Nixon's international vision, Vietnam served as a persistent irritant. Early in his

⁴⁵ Margaret MacMillan, *Nixon and Mao: The Week That Changed the World* (New York: Random House, 2007).

second year as president, Nixon delivered to Congress what was dubbed a “State of the World” message. The “First Annual Report to Congress on Foreign Policy” was an awesome intellectual achievement, a sweeping one-hundred-page geostrategic survey with sections on every corner of the globe and considerations of every piece on the international chessboard, some eight pages on Africa policy alone. The rather short discussion of Vietnam looked almost like an afterthought, coming more than fourteen thousand words into the document. It was Asia *after* Vietnam, after all, that he was interested in shaping. But it was Vietnam that consumed ever greater drafts of his attention, and Vietnam, he knew, that would define his legacy.⁴⁶

Many who voted for him in 1968 had done so because they thought they had heard in his campaign’s fog of words a promise to end the war. Hard upon his inauguration, doves in both parties urged him to seize the opportunity, as George Aiken, ranking Republican on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee famously put it, to “declare victory and go home.” This Nixon chose not to do. Instead he devised an interlocking political and military strategy that combined periodic

⁴⁶ *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Richard Nixon, 1970* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1971), doc. 45, available at <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=2835>.

drawdowns of U.S. forces in South Vietnam (from 553,000 at his inauguration to 152,000 by election year 1972) with escalating, and often savagely unpredictable, bombing of North Vietnam. The idea was to intimidate North Vietnam into agreeing to peace terms favorable to the United States. It did not succeed. Publicly, Nixon steadfastly maintained that national honor depended on not abandoning the effort to stand up an independent South Vietnamese government in Saigon, savaging the patriotism of all who said otherwise—while privately, Nixon and Kissinger told intimates that an independent South Vietnam was impossible, and worked on a peace deal to merely hold it together for a temporary “decent interval” following the American withdrawal. That way, Nixon could say he had not lost the Vietnam War. The terms eventually arrived at were no better than the ones on the table in 1968—at the cost of 25,000 more American lives.⁴⁷

He was, at any rate, sorely distracted. The rage for control had so diseased his White House that by the spring of 1973 the Oval Office was consumed by attempts to keep the president’s closest associates, and possibly even the president, from going to jail.

⁴⁷ “Aiken Suggests U.S. Say It Has Won War,” *New York Times*, October 20, 1966; Larry Berman, *No Peace, No Honor: Nixon, Kissinger, and Betrayal in Vietnam* (New York: Touchstone, 2002).

What was Watergate? The word came to refer not to a single event, but to a cascade of revelations that came forth when Congress and the press began investigating a single event: the June 1972 break-in of Democratic National Committee headquarters at the Watergate Hotel. The revelations—what his former attorney general and 1972 campaign manager, who would go to jail for them, called the “White House horrors”—traced back practically to the onset of his first term. Were they a mere epiphenomenon, as his defenders argue, to Nixon’s presidency and career? Horrors dated back to the beginning of his presidency are hard to see as flowing from anything but qualities essential to Nixon.

On Nixon’s 116th day in the White House, Henry Kissinger arranged for the FBI to wiretap three members of his own NSC staff, and also the secretary of defense’s senior military assistant. Secrecy and bureaucratic containment constituted a central principle of their diplomatic method, and the *New York Times* had just reported their secret bombing in Cambodia. Then Nixon arranged for a bugging through entirely extralegal channels, recruiting a retired policeman from the New York City Red Squad attached to the White House staff to tap the phone of one of the nation’s most distinguished columnists, Joseph Kraft. Kraft

was friends with Kissinger, and Nixon wanted to know what his right-hand man was up to. Which was only fair: for his part, Kissinger was exploring channels to spy on Nixon. A culture of surveillance, flowing from the rage to control, was endemic to this White House.⁴⁸

The culture of surveillance flowed, too, from principles Nixon first enunciated in a prize-winning 1929 schoolboy speech, “Our Privileges under the Constitution,” reenunciated by Nixon to his dying day: as he put it in his maiden House speech in 1947, “the rights of free speech and free press do not carry with them the right to advocate the destruction of the very Government which protects the freedom of an individual to express his views.” America was at war in Vietnam, part of a global Cold War; the Americans who opposed it were no better than fifth column sappers; “hundreds, perhaps thousands, of Americans—mostly under 30—are determined to destroy our society,” explained a memo from one of the president’s favorite staffers, a former army intelligence officer named Tom Charles Huston. By the end of its first year, the administration had one hundred undercover officers compiling dossiers on organizations like the NAACP, the ACLU, and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. The

⁴⁸ Anthony Lukas, *Nightmare: The Underside of the Nixon Years* (New York: Viking, 1976), 44–52, 64–65.

CIA infiltrated antiwar organizations. The Department of Health, Education, and Welfare kept a blacklist of antiwar scientists. An entire unit of the Internal Revenue Service was chartered—in a locked, soundproof room in the IRS basement—to harass them.⁴⁹

The crusade for control extended into the electoral realm, motivated by that other Nixonian principle: that the making and execution of foreign policy was the prerogative solely of the Oval Office. By the middle of 1970, antiwar senators were introducing bills to defund the war. Efforts to defeat them were too important to leave to the Republican Party (indeed some of the most influential antiwar senators were in the Republican Party). So the White House financed an entire campaign apparatus to beat antiwar senators, organized out of a Georgetown basement. Rich men and corporations seeking favors from the White House were all but ordered to offer up donations outside the conventional campaign finance system. White House lawyers were convinced this was legal, since disclosure requirements didn't apply to donations made "in" the

⁴⁹ Brodie, *Richard Nixon*, chapter 14; Reeves, *President Nixon*, 235–36; Kutler, *Wars of Watergate*, 97, 105; Schell, *Time of Illusion*, 114; Karl E. Campbell, "Senator Sam Ervin and the Army Spy Scandal of 1970–1971: Balancing National Security and Civil Liberties in a Free Society," Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission, <http://www.cmhpf.org/senator%20sam%20ervin.htm>; Lukas, *Nightmare*, 22.

District of Columbia. But also by this time, the White House had already drawn up plans to consider what Huston stressed were “clearly illegal” breaking and entering as a component in the crusade for control.⁵⁰

Nixon acted not despite the Silent Majority he described as so pure and decent, but, in a sense, on their behalf, even at their request. His paranoia and dread were their own; the antiwar insurgents, the hippies, the Black Panthers, were taking over. The test was the 1970 off-year elections, for which Nixon and Vice President Spiro Agnew crisscrossed the nation fulminating about the preservation of civilization against the barbarians. They thought they could not lose. What happened was: they lost. This was the trauma—the loss of control—that many judge the point of no return on the road to Watergate. An internal White House unit was established to “plug leaks”—the “Plumbers.” In the middle of 1971 they became the operational arm of a presidential obsession: destroying the man, Daniel Ellsberg, who had leaked a massive Pentagon study exposing America’s failures in Vietnam. Nixon responded like a mad sorcerer, convinced that the “Pentagon Papers” was but the latest chapter in a feckless Establishment’s endless war against him. Nixon begged the men around him to firebomb the Brookings Institution, certain

⁵⁰ Reeves, *President Nixon*, 153, 231, 244–45.

that the liberal think tank was hoarding secret intelligence that could bring down the government-in-exile conspiring against him. The Plumbers were sent to Los Angeles to break into Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist's office. These were points of no return. All of it was justified in the name of protecting national security, which the president had come to identify as coextensive with his own person, like a monarch: "if the President does it," he explained his thinking in a 1977 interview, "it's not illegal."⁵¹

Nixon had a favorite associate, Chuck Colson, his constant companion in mad schemes like this. Colson reflected to the president that summer: "I have not yet thought through all the subtle ways in which we can keep the Democratic Party in a constant state of civil warfare." As election year 1972 approached, that project of degrading the opposition party's political capabilities, to deliver up a November mandate for a Nixon second term, became the Oval Office's consuming passion. Any imaginable Democratic presidency, the president justified to himself, would be "extremely dangerous internationally." And so, funded by more secret slush funds, two separate teams fanned out to states to sabotage candidates vying for the Demo-

⁵¹ Perlstein, *Nixonland*, 578–84, 592–97; David Frost, "I Gave them a Sword": *Behind the Scenes of the Nixon Interviews* (New York: Morrow, 1978).

cratic presidential nomination. Their techniques were fiendish: fake invitations to nonexistent campaign events; smearing letters sent to voters; fake ties “established” to radical groups—all carefully designed to make it look as if they originated from other Democratic campaigns. Only one contender was left alone: George McGovern, the most left-wing viable candidate. One aim of the sabotage strategy was to strengthen his candidacy vis-à-vis the others, because Nixon thought he’d be the one easiest to beat in the general election.⁵²

Another of Nixon’s dirty tricks in 1972 was bribing George Wallace out of running for president as a Democrat instead of as a third-party candidate. That kept the divisive issue of busing in the forefront of the Democratic primaries, ratcheting up the civil warfare yet further. When Wallace was paralyzed in an assassination attempt in May, the Democratic race was still competitive between McGovern and Hubert Humphrey. Now the crucial question was how the delegates he won would be distributed. The decision rested with Democratic National Committee chair Lawrence O’Brien, a longtime Nixon *bête noir* and Kennedy family retainer. That may have been one

⁵² Bruce Oudes, ed., *From: The President. Richard Nixon’s Secret Files* (New York: HarperCollins, 1989), 182–84; Matusow, *Nixon’s Economy*, 84; Perlstein, *Nixonland*, 623–24, 629–33, 635; Lukas, *Nightmare*, 165.

of the more important motives for the bugging of O'Brien's office in the Watergate for intelligence on Democratic political activities. The bugging, however, proved unsuccessful. The burglary team returned to fix the problem on June 16, but this time they were caught. The president was protected from knowing the precise details of such operations; he served more as their inspiration and goad. Following the arrest of the Watergate burglars, however, he was quickly brought up to speed. His response was to direct, with cunning and gusto, a cover-up of White House ties to the crime, and a strategy to obstruct all investigations. It worked long enough to secure Nixon's landslide reelection. But once Congress turned to the investigation with subpoena power, Watergate became what the Hiss case had been from 1948 to 1950—a gripping multiyear national soap opera, only this time with Nixon as the hunted instead of the hunter.⁵³

Nixon's presidency limped to its denouement by way of a grim paradox: his lieutenants were shown conducting illicit operations of such high stakes and complexity that only a senior official would have supervised them. But the more senior the official who was suborned into taking respon-

⁵³ Perlstein, *Nixonland*, 631–32; Lukas, *Nightmare*, 195–231; Kutler, *Wars of Watergate*.

sibility, the further he stood to fall; and the better he knew the error of trusting this president to protect him. John Dean, the White House counselor charged by the president with coordinating the cover-up, broke in June of 1973, testifying in minute detail of the president's complicity in crimes to the Senate Watergate committee. At first, it was merely his word against Nixon's. Then the nation was shocked to learn that Nixon had recorded nearly every word uttered in his Oval Office on voice-activated tapes: hoist on his own petard by the very obsession with control that defined him. By the summer of 1974, keeping these tapes from congressional investigators became the pitiful essence of his ruined presidency. Richard Nixon could not survive the public's naked confrontation with Richard Nixon. The Supreme Court ruled the tapes belonged to the public, not to him personally, on July 24, 1974. He resigned fifteen days later ahead of certain Senate conviction on three articles of impeachment.⁵⁴

The next day, August 8, 1974, he gave a speech to his White House staff that provided a way for his diehard defenders to process the awful previous months. It was the same story he'd been telling since he founded the salt-of-the-earth Orthogoni-

⁵⁴ Rick Perlstein, "The Unraveling: The Tale of the New Nixon Tapes," *Slate*, November 26, 1997, <http://www.slate.com/id/3028/>.

ans to do battle with the snooty, condescending Franklins. He rehearsed his background: his father was “a streetcar motorman first, and then he was a farmer, and then he had a lemon ranch. It was the poorest lemon ranch in California, I can assure you.” “My mother,” he said, “was a saint.” He himself had chosen public service, and had not enriched himself—for there was something “far more important than money. It is a cause bigger than yourself. It is the cause of making this the greatest nation in the world.” He advertised his humility: “I am not educated, but I do read books.”

He also included the following strange detail. “Nobody will ever write a book, probably, about my mother.” It was a reference to men not so humble, men born with silver spoons in their mouths—men who looked down on you and me. Rose Kennedy, matriarch of the clan, had just come out with an autobiography, and it was the talk of the opinion-making elites. Then he repeated it: “Yes, she will have no books written about her.” Because we are not Kennedys, they won’t cut us a break: in his self-pity, he couldn’t resist an oblique swipe at the well-born, the snooty, the sophisticates—his enemies. He seemed almost to blame them him for his fate: “Always remember, others may hate you, but those who hate you don’t win unless you hate them, and then you destroy your-

self.” They had forced him to hate them. They had not let his sagacity and good intentions come to the fore. From that, all else followed. If gold rust, what shall iron do?⁵⁵

IX

Once more, it was not the end. It wasn't long before Richard Nixon was submitting himself to one more campaign—this one for ex-president, for the right to be deferred to and respected like any other former occupant of the Oval Office. He marketed himself as a foreign policy sage, the man who could take the long view, the guru of peace. Once more, as President Kennedy had once advised him, the vector was writing books. They rolled off the presses at regular intervals, titles like *The Real War* (1980), *Leaders: Profiles and Reminiscences of Men Who Have Shaped the Modern World* (1982), *No More Vietnams* (1987), *1999: Victory without War* (1988), *Seize the Moment: America's Challenges in the One Superpower World* (1992), and, finally, *Beyond Peace* (1994). He carried out, too, another campaign, this one in the courtroom: attempting to keep his White House tapes out of

⁵⁵ *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Richard Nixon, 1974* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1975), doc. 245, available at <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=4325>.

the public domain. He spent an estimated five million dollars to do so.

The latter effort failed, though posthumously: two years after Nixon's 1994 death, the National Archives reached a settlement that would eventually bring more than three thousand hours of tapes into the public domain.⁵⁶ The former campaign was a very limited success. Historians in a 2000 *Wall Street Journal* canvass ranked him merely "Below Average"—above "Failures" Tyler, Fillmore, and Pierce. Richard Nixon became Ronald Reagan's most frequent outside consultant on foreign affairs. The notion of Nixon as the last bastion of moderate, even liberal, Republican policy-making took hold; the opening to China is heralded as a masterstroke; even the abuses of power, some believe, have come to pale in comparison to those of George W. Bush, whose devotion to executive secrecy John W. Dean has called, in the title of a book, *Worse Than Watergate*. The word has had the effect of containing his failings in the public mind: if Watergate was bad, everything else must have been better. At Nixon's funeral—after declaring a national day of mourning—President Clinton said as much himself: "May the day of judging President Nixon on anything less than his entire life and career come to a

⁵⁶ Stanley Kutler, *Abuse of Power: The New Nixon Tapes* (New York: Free Press, 1997), xiv–xv.

close.” Gerald Ford called him “one of the finest, if not the finest, foreign policy presidents of this century.” Senator Bob Dole of Kansas, the Republican National Committee chair during Watergate, orated that “the second half of the 20th century will be known as the age of Nixon.”⁵⁷

In a sense he surely did not intend, Bob Dole was correct. What Nixon left behind was the very terms of our national self-image: the notion that there are two kinds of Americans. On the one side: Nixon’s “Silent Majority,” the “non-shouters”: the Middle Class, Middle America; the suburban, exurban, and rural coalition who call themselves “value voters,” “people of faith,” and “patriots”—and who feel themselves condescended to by snobby opinion-making elites. On the other side are the “liberals,” the “cosmopolitans,” the “intellectuals.” They see shouting in opposition to injustice as a higher form of patriotism; they say “live and let live”; they believe having “values” has more to do with a willingness to extend aid to the downtrodden than with where, or whether, you happen to worship—and they look down on the first category as unwitting dupes of feckless elites who exploit sentimental

⁵⁷ *Wall Street Journal* Online, “Hail to the Chief: Scholars Rank the Presidents,” <http://www.opinionjournal.com/hail/>; author interview with Richard Reeves; Maureen Dowd, “The 37th President: The Overview; Nixon Buried on Note of Praise and Reconciliation,” *New York Times*, April 28, 1994.

pieties to aggrandize their wealth. Both populations are equally, essentially American. And each has learned to consider the other not quite American at all. In that sense, Bob Dole was correct. The argument over Richard Nixon, pro and con, gave us the language for this war. We are living in the Age of Nixon still.

Bibliographic Note

Some of the documents herein are presented in their entirety. Others are excerpts, with the missing portions indicated by ellipses. Many of these excerpted documents, however, can be easily found online in full via Google, including the Frank Gannon interviews (chapter 4), the Checkers speech (chapter 7), the first Kennedy-Nixon debate (chapter 10), the “Last Press Conference” (chapter 11), and the 1968 acceptance speech (chapter 16). Also, every official presidential utterance (chapters 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 26, 27, 28, 29, and 30) is accessible at <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu>. A selection of important transcripts of President Nixon’s conversations regarding Watergate and related matters can be found in Stanley Kutler, *Abuse of Power: The New Nixon Tapes* (New York: Free Press, 1997). They can be listened to in full at the National Archives in College Park, Maryland, and all the recordings are slowly being digitized by the Miller Center of Public Affairs at the University of Virginia and made available at http://millercenter.org/index.php/academic/presidentialrecordings/pages/tapes_rmn.

I would be glad to entertain questions at Nixonland@live.com.

Rick Perlstein
Chicago, Illinois