

Chapter One

NIXON BIOGRAPHIES

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One of the most written about of all America's leaders, Richard Nixon still remains one of the most elusive for biographers. None of the many studies produced to date on the life and character of the thirty-seventh president has fully captured this complex man. The absence of anything approaching a definitive biography of Nixon stands in marked contrast to those gracing the lives of most of his significant predecessors.

Why Richard Nixon is such a difficult subject for biography is not hard to explain. First, gaining access to his presidential records, held until recently at the Nixon Presidential Materials Project in the National Archives at College Park, Maryland, was initially fraught with difficulty. The former president conducted a dogged campaign first to block and then to slow their release, one that his estate continued after his death in 1994. Meanwhile, the Nixon pre-presidential and post-presidential papers were held some three thousand miles to the west at the private Richard M. Nixon Presidential Library and Birthplace in Yorba Linda, California and also, until recently, at the National Archives facility in Laguna Niguel. The integration in 2007 of these hitherto separate collections in the Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, now made part of the presidential library system administered by the National Archives, has largely resolved these legalistic and logistic problems, a development that should ease but not erase the challenge of Nixon biography (Hoff 1996; Worsham 2007).

Even with fuller access to the historical documents, the task of writing Nixon's story will continue to pose problems that do not pertain to biographical examination of other modern presidents. As traditionally understood, the art of historical biography is the telling of history through the

telling of lives (Ambrosius 2004). This is particularly difficult in Nixon's case because symbolism has been as significant as substance in biographical interpretation of him. In consequence, no other major figure of twentieth-century American politics has been subject to such divergent characterization. Such diffuse terms as populist, liberal, conservative, free-world crusader, red-baiter, mad bomber, and peacemaker have all been used to describe him at one stage or another – and these by no means exhaust the lexicon of Nixonography. In view of Nixon's lack of fixed identity in his biographical canon, some analysts contend that his image and the disputed meanings it engendered have become as important to understand as what he actually did. In the words of Daniel Frick, “[W]hen we fight about Nixon, we are fighting about the meaning of America. And that is a struggle that never ends” (Frick 2008: 17; see also Greenberg 2003). If that is the case, disagreement over what his life signified about his nation is less a matter of establishing what is true than it is a struggle to shape understanding of the recent past, which in turn influences perspectives on the present and future.

The problems of document-based research and of separating symbol from substance largely explain why Nixon biographies by professional historians to date number only three. Reaction against his final campaign for rehabilitation from the disgrace of Watergate and presidential resignation is another factor. Nixon has occupied a lowly status in the scholarly ranking of presidential greatness – usually with the likes of James Buchanan, Ulysses S. Grant, and Warren Harding for company in the “failed presidents” category (Bose and Nelson 2003; Felzenberg 2008). Frustrated with the consistently negative assessment of historians in particular, the former president declared in a 1988 television interview: “History will treat me fairly. Historians probably won't, because most historians are on the left” (Nixon 1990: 75).

To Nixon, the hostility of historians was another example of the enmity of liberals that he had suffered throughout his political career. In reality, their animus had less to do with ideological prejudice than a concern about the meaning and making of history. In the eyes of many scholars, Nixon's efforts to be his own historian in the memoirs and books he wrote in retirement made history vulnerable to personal interest and manipulation. This served to limit their enthusiasm for Nixon revisionism lest they inadvertently became allies in his post-resignation pursuit of respectability and, after his death, the efforts of his admirers to rewrite the past in his favor. As Stanley Kutler, arguably the foremost historian of Watergate, remarked, “Richard Nixon has struggled mightily for the soul of history and historians. Historians *ought* to worry about theirs” (Kutler 1992: 111).

Plenty of others have rushed in where historians seemingly fear to tread, of course. In its consideration of the myriad Nixon biographies, this chapter organizes these works into the following categories for analysis: “Nixon

ascendant” pre-Watergate biographies; psychobiographies; Nixon’s memoirs and post-resignation writings; redemption and damnation post-Watergate biographies by non-professional historians; and scholarly studies.

Nixon Ascendant Biographies

As Nixon rose in politics, he became the subject of admiring studies written by sympathetic journalists. Produced as a vice-presidential campaign book, Philip Andrews’s 1952 volume is historically interesting as the first Nixon biography – and the one with the longest title – but for little else. Consideration of Nixon biographical historiography better starts with Ralph de Toledano’s 1956 study, which was updated for the 1960 campaign and provided the foundations of a third volume when his hero finally got to the White House. These works manifest three traits common in the pre-downfall biographies. They present Nixon as: a man of the people rising through his work ethic; a lone battler against the institutional power of the establishment; and a leader dedicated to his nation’s interests in seeking practical solutions rather than doctrinaire responses to its problems.

De Toledano had come to know Nixon when covering the Alger Hiss case as a *Newsweek* journalist. A supporter of the post-War conservative movement, he also wrote for anti-Communist journals like *American Mercury* and became in 1955 a founder of *National Review*, but broke with his fellow editors in backing Nixon over Barry Goldwater for the 1960 Republican presidential nomination. For him, Nixon “represents an American phenomenon ... as indigenous as an Indian fighter, as characteristic as a covered wagon, as unpretentious as apple pie” (de Toledano 1956: 16). Whereas psychobiographers tended to emphasize the negative effects of Nixon’s family background in allegedly warping his personality, de Toledano typifies the tendency in early biographies to celebrate it for making him an American everyman dedicated to hard work in pursuit of the American Dream. He also sees a sense of destiny in Nixon’s choice of a political career to lead a nation that generations of his forbears had shaped in their ordinary lives: “Heredity is the operative word, for there have been Nixons and Milhouses in America almost as long as there has been a white man’s America. And though Nixon has never made a fetish of it, the consciousness – and subconsciousness – of his antecedents as a fact of his life and character is with him at all times, as it should be” (de Toledano 1969: 15).

De Toledano’s books present Nixon as the solitary battler for truth and justice in the House Committee on Un-American Activities’ (HUAC) investigation of Alger Hiss. His lone warrior is a man of conscience determined to lay bare not only the communist conspiracy in government but also liberal efforts to cover it up. Echoing his hero’s own perspective, de Toledano sees this episode both as the making of Nixon and the issue that would dog

him for the remainder of his time in politics because of liberals' desire to be revenged for his exposure of their folly in supporting Hiss. The case "earned him the enduring enmity of powerful men in high places, and lesser men – in government, journalism, among the liberal intelligentsia – whose aggregate influence is immense. ... They turned on him not only because of Hiss, but because he had proved the dangerous error of their belief that communists were merely 'liberals in a hurry'" (de Toledano 1969: 99).

Lastly, de Toledano's own conservatism did not prevent him from admiring what he described as Nixon's "divorcement from any doctrinaire espousal" (de Toledano 1956: 183). The politician who emerges from his pages is prepared to appropriate what best suits the nation's needs from the agendas of both liberalism and conservatism without identifying himself with either value system. In relation to this, de Toledano anticipates later analysts in asserting that both sides of the political divide tried to remake Nixon's identity into their own image of him (de Toledano 1956: 182; 1969: 9–10, 374). However, post-Watergate scholarship would not recognize his depiction of President Nixon as anxious for quiet discourse, patience and caution in the task of governing America at a difficult moment in time (de Toledano 1969: 1–13, 360–74).

Other than de Toledano, Nixon's favorite chronicler was *New York Herald Tribune* reporter Earl Mazo, whose biography spent fifteen weeks (highest position number six) on the *New York Times Book Review* best-seller list in 1959. A friend of Nixon's, Mazo got him to open up in interviews more than any other writer probably would ever do. In part, this was because his subject trusted him to write the story he wanted. The staples of the Nixon life are all there: the rise from humble origins through hard work and talent; the tenacity against the odds in the Hiss case; and the willingness to do what is right for the nation regardless of ideological inconsistency. The author gave his subject the chance to review the manuscript and propose any changes, but it was so friendly that none of substance was required. In writing it, Mazo had already taken up a number of Nixon's suggestions, notably that he address head-on the criticism that his issue positions were based on electoral calculation rather than principle. An updated version, written with the assistance of political scientist Stephen Hess, took the story to 1968. This uncritically reported a Nixon statement in an interview with Mazo that his determination not to plunge the nation into a constitutional crisis was his main reason for not contesting the 1960 presidential election count. It also contains an interview transcript in which Nixon defines his politics in somewhat mangled fashion but to best advantage for 1968: "You can't classify me. ... I'm just not doctrinaire. If there is one thing that classifies me it is that I'm a non-extremist" (Mazo and Hess 1968: 316).

Two other biographies produced for the 1960 campaign also merit consideration as part of the Nixon-rising genre. Hungarian émigré Bela

Kornitzer wrote a human-interest study that received much more cooperation from Hannah Nixon than from her son, who consented to only one interview and was uncomfortable with the writer's angle. Kornitzer had built his career in the United States by focusing on parent-child relations in shaping the characters of its leaders. This reflected his belief that the essence of US democracy was to be found in the tolerant democratic attitudes prevalent in the American family. One of the interesting snippets in his book is the reproduction of a letter written by Nixon when ten years old, in which he imagined himself as a dog begging his master to come home because he is being mistreated by his temporary carers. For Hannah, who let Kornitzer see the letter, it was just an example of her son's precocious intelligence. For later psychobiographers, however, it was evidence that Nixon's childhood was shaped by maternal control and a desperate yearning for his mother's love (Kornitzer 1960: 57; Abrahamsen 1977: 59–63).

William Costello's *The Facts about Nixon*, the sole exception to the generally friendly tenor of early biographies, has historical interest as the first critical study of his life. Growing out of a series of articles in *The New Republic*, it is generally well researched but faults Nixon's McCarthyite past, particularly in the Hiss case, and what the author sees as his opportunism in shifting to the center ground of politics in the 1950s. Even so, Costello is at one with the Nixon-as-common-man orthodoxy in declaring his subject "an authentic product of the American pioneer tradition," who succeeded because "no effort was impossible, no goal unattainable" (Costello 1960: 17).

Psychobiography

Political scientist David Barber's 1972 study of presidential character claimed that it was possible to predict how presidents would behave in office on the basis of which one of four personality types they fitted into. In an interview with *Time* magazine, he pronounced Nixon a psychologically flawed active-negative president who was ambitious out of anxiety (*Time* 1972; see also Hirsh 1980). Notwithstanding the problems of reducing human complexity to four types and his questionable categorization of particular presidents, the turn of events appeared to validate Barber's warnings and helped to give respectability to the new Nixon studies genre of psychobiography.

Predating Barber, the first entry in this field was journalist-academic Gary Wills's *Nixon Agonistes* (1970), but in reality this was more cultural history with Nixon at its center than psychobiography. For Wills, Nixon was the embodiment of the self-made man, who had triumphed in the political market by becoming the "least authentic man alive, the late mover, tester of responses, submissive to the discipline of consent." Brilliant though this study is as a cultural polemic, it works far less well as biography – even of

the “psycho” kind – because Nixon is reduced to a one-dimensional figure. As a consequence, Wills leaves many questions about his protagonist unasked let alone unanswered. In particular, if Nixon was so inauthentic, why did he generate controversy throughout his career and why was he so prone to take political and policy risks?

More authentically psychobiographical but inherently less interesting than the Wills study are the oeuvres of historian Bruce Mazlish (1972) and Manhattan psychoanalyst (and criminal-behavior specialist) David Abrahamsen (1977). Both make sweeping claims about Nixon’s personality without having interviewed their subject and his close family or examined the documentary record (beyond his public statements). For Mazlish, three factors defined Nixon’s persona: absorption of self in his role (in essence being Nixon *is* his role); ambivalence; and denial as a defense against unacceptable feelings. Their supposed effect was that Nixon had as much difficulty as the rest of the country in deciding who he really was. In Mazlish’s pre-Watergate estimate, the president’s insecurity in not knowing himself could create serious problems for his administration and the nation. In Abrahamsen’s post-Watergate analysis, the possibility became proven in his portrayal of Nixon as engaged in constant struggle between two different sides of his personality. The effect was a string of psychological disorders that included being obsessive-compulsive, self-hating, hysterical, masochistic, uncertain of his masculinity, and even psychopathic, all of which made it difficult for him to link morality and behavior. The root of Nixon’s problems in Abrahamsen’s analysis was the contradictory influence of his mother and father and his inability to please both. According to the psychoanalyst, “His childhood fears and anger never left him, even when he became president of the United States” (Abrahamsen 1977: 248).

Fawn Brodie’s posthumously published *Richard Nixon: The Shaping of His Character* also portrayed a man prone to rage, hatreds, images of death, and duplicity, one torn above all between the conflicting personalities of his brutal father and gentle mother. She is particularly concerned to explain why Nixon told so many lies throughout his political career. In Brodie’s analysis, he did so “to gain love, to shore up his grandiose fantasies, to bolster his ever wavering sense of identity” (Brodie 1981: 25). Though less technical in its psychoanalysis than others of the genre, her work still presents problems for historians. It concentrates on Nixon’s first fifty years, but does not explain why his lying and other negative traits did not become evident until he entered politics. A perfectly reasonable case can be made that Nixon was hardly maladjusted as a youth, college student, and World War II naval officer. Even when it came to politics, Brodie showed a marked reluctance to explain why he sometimes did good because her concern was always with his capacity for doing bad things.

What is arguably the best psychobiography, by Vamik Volkan (a psychiatry professor), Norman Itzkowitz (a historian with psychoanalytic training),

and Andrew Dod (a student of the latter), attempts to explain this paradox. The strengths and weaknesses of their Nixon is to be found in his psyche: “Without the unconscious need for applause engendered by his search for a nurturing mother image and his avoidance of facing frustration by developing excessive narcissism, and with his ‘ego strengths’ to respond to such needs,” he may not have made the presidency his goal (Volkan *et al.* 1996: 148). Out of this came a three-faceted persona: a grandiose self (reflected in a penchant for bold action and historical firsts); a peacemaker side to overcome the gap between grandiose and devalued selves (visiting China; southern school desegregation); and a dark side drawing from an internal image of a brutal father that caused him to punish himself (destroying his administration). All this is provocatively interesting but relies on speculation, overstatement, and selective evidence. Nixon supposedly had a castration complex because of the association of his butcher father with knives, but Frank was primarily a grocer and service-station owner. Historical events are also categorized to fit the psychoanalytic thesis – Vietnamization was more a defensive measure than a bold initiative. Moreover, Nixon did not identify with Lincoln as much as the authors claim – Theodore Roosevelt was the predecessor he most admired.

As a genre, psychobiographies offer insights but these have to be used with caution. Much of the analysis is inferential because Nixon was never on any author’s couch. Nor have any mined the Nixon papers as these became increasingly available. There is also a tendency to exaggerate Nixon the individual without full consideration of the historical and institutional contexts in which he operated. Moreover, skeptics might contend that there is usually a plausible alternative to the psychoanalytic explanation of his conduct. For example, Volkan and his co-authors see Nixon’s 1969 decision to drop his middle initial “M” (for Milhous, Hannah’s family name) as a declaration of independence from his recently deceased mother, but it may well have been part of a public-relations strategy to appear less formal in the eyes of the now all-important “middle-American” constituency.

Nixon Memoirs

Nixon emulated one of his heroes in his determination to write his own version of history. In his celebrated 1977 interview with David Frost, he remarked, “What history says about my administration will depend on who writes history. Winston Churchill once told one of his critics that history ... would treat him well, and his critic said: ‘How do you know?’ And he said, ‘Because I intend to write it’” (Hoff 1994: 341).

He produced ten books in total, nine of them after he left the presidency (*RN* 1978; *The Real War* 1980; *Leaders* 1982; *Real Peace* 1984; *No More Vietnams* 1985; *1999: Victory Without War* 1989; *In the Arena* 1990; *Seize*

the Moment 1992; *Beyond Peace* 1994). Most of these were foreign-policy commentaries intended to cast détente in the best light as a means of containing Soviet power and burnish his elder-statesman reputation as a geopolitical maestro. Three volumes were memoirs that are essential sources for study of his life.

Nixon first memoir *Six Crises* (1962) sold over 250,000 copies and stayed on the best-seller list for six months. It dealt with six make-or-break episodes that put his political career in best light. These were exposing Hiss, withstanding the slush-fund allegations in the 1952 campaign, his dignified vice-presidential conduct after President Dwight D. Eisenhower's heart attack, his coolness when in physical danger from a Caracas, Venezuela mob in 1958, standing tall for the United States in the kitchen debate of 1959 with Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev, and his near victory against the electoral odds in 1960. Significantly absent from the roster of crises are the 1946 House election and the 1950 Senate election, in which Nixon earned a reputation for smear politics.

The choice of "crises" as the construct for understanding his life in politics is itself suggestive of Nixon's personal insecurities. The constancy of "battle," a word often linked with crisis in the book, meant that he could never savor victory because of the recurrent threat of defeat. The source of his troubles is the Hiss case that left a "residue of hatred and hostility toward me" on the part of liberals and their media allies (Nixon 1962: 69). Testifying to his own sense of grandiosity, Nixon's melds his personal crises into national ones by presenting himself as a man fighting alone against great odds to uphold America's values. As a result, he airbrushed out of history the crucial support he received from others. This so exasperated Robert Stripling, HUAC's primary investigator in the Hiss case, that he called Nixon's account in *Six Crises* "pure bullshit" (Morris 1990: 508). Despite the book's dedication "To Pat/she also ran," there was no proper acknowledgment of his wife's critical role in sustaining him at low points in his career. As one biographer later put it, Nixon "could never get through a crisis without Pat. She was his partner from the first campaign to the last" (Ambrose 1987: 642). The focus on self might support psychobiographers' assertions of Nixon's narcissism, but it also signified that *Six Crises* was a campaign document intended to remind voters of his achievements and promote another bid for office.

In this latter regard, the final chapter is particularly significant as Nixon deals with why he failed to win in 1960. This account never accepts the possibility of voter rejection, but instead explains defeat in terms of tactical error (the scheduling of the debates), contingency (Nixon's illness early in the campaign), media bias, and, in particular, vote fraud in Illinois and Texas. The logic of this is that the people still liked Nixon but the presidency could be "stolen by thievery at the ballot box" (Nixon 1962: 393, 399, 413, 414–15). Unsurprisingly, this outlook encouraged a post-Watergate belief

that Nixon henceforth considered himself entitled to win the presidency by any means necessary because he had been cheated out of it in 1960 (Frick 2008; Ewald 1981).

Nixon's next book, *RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon*, ran to over 1,100 pages and became a best seller that sold more than 330,000 copies within six months of publication in 1978. It begins with the most eye-catching opening line of any presidential autobiography, intended to make him the embodiment of the American Dream – "I was born in a house my father built" – but the rest of the book does not live up to this great start. The first third, which deals with Nixon's pre-presidential life, adds little to what was already known. The middle section on his first presidential term offers a fluent defense of détente and the benefits of opening up the People's Republic of China but a lame justification of his Vietnam policy and why it degenerated into a prolonged and costly retreat. Without doubt one of the best features is the assessment of foreign leaders with whom Nixon dealt, notably Mao Zedong and Leonid Brezhnev. Interestingly, Nixon desists from direct criticism of Henry Kissinger, who did not show the same restraint about his old boss in his memoirs. Kissinger wrote about the opening to China, for example, as illustrating Nixon's "tendency for illusion to become reality, a brooding and involuted streak that, together with starker character traits, at first flawed, and later destroyed, a Presidency so rich in foreign policy achievements" (Kissinger 1979: 1094–5). Nevertheless, Nixon does quote with evident relish Secretary of State William Rogers's view of his arch-rival for the president's ear as "Machiavellian, deceitful, egotistic, arrogant, and insulting" (Nixon 1978: 433).

The final section on Watergate presents it as a blunder on Nixon's part but not an intentional or criminal one. There are numerous evasions, half-truths and outright lies regarding what he knew and when pertaining to the cover-up of White House involvement in the Watergate burglary. The memoir conveys the impression, drawing on Nixon's diary entries, of the president as the victim of overzealous aides and intent on cooperating with the initial FBI investigation of the affair. This is quite a variance with his conduct as revealed on the Watergate tapes when finally released (Kutler 1997). Moreover, there is no recognition that Watergate was a crisis of the imperial presidency rather than a mere presidential scandal pertaining to a cover-up of political espionage. According to chief editorial assistant Frank Gannon, Nixon laid down his memoir-writing philosophy in no uncertain terms to the staff helping him with the research and writing: "We won't grovel; we won't confess; we won't do a *mea culpa* act; but we will be one hundred per cent accurate" (Aitken 1993: 538). Living up to the first three dictates, as the memoirs did, made it impossible to uphold the remaining one.

In sum, *RN: The Memoirs* is interesting for three reasons. Far more than *Six Crises*, which disclosed more than he intended, Nixon weaved the web of opacity around those parts of his story that did not reflect well on him – but

to only limited effect. The book was battling the reality that his misdeeds were too well known to be downplayed. In its first two sections, Nixon portrays himself as an idealist intent on doing what is best for his country, but it is evident that he has lost all sense of the difference between right and wrong in the final section. Possibly the most astute assessment comes from an otherwise admiring biographer, Conrad Black: “Where Nixon’s record was strong, the book was strong. Where his record was vulnerable, it was evasive and sometimes dubious, especially in his lawlessness, cynicism, and endless threats of illegal vengeance on enemies” (Black 2007: 1018). Secondly, with its publication marking the launch of Nixon’s drive for rehabilitation, the memoir carries far more importance for personal redemption than was the case for any other presidential autobiography. Measured by this criterion, however, it could only be the opening shot in a campaign that would succeed well beyond what might have looked possible on August 8, 1974 without ever doing so in absolute terms. Finally, some authorities consider it the best book on Nixon’s life and career (Black 2007). This judgment arguably overlooks the superior merit of historian Stephen Ambrose’s three-volume study (Ambrose 1987, 1989, 1991). Nevertheless, the claim is not so far-fetched that it can be dismissed out of hand, which itself is testimony to the limitations of Nixon biography.

Nixon’s final memoir, published just before the opening of the Richard Nixon Library and Birthplace, was a celebration of his survival entitled *In the Arena: A Memoir of Victory, Defeat, and Renewal* (1990). This is less a story of his life than a review of the lessons to be drawn from it. The first section portrays his moments of greatest triumph (the China visit) and defeat (resigning the presidency) and his post-1974 renewal. The clear message is that his persistence in coming back from the wilderness of disgrace has earned him the right to be a wise elder statesman to whom the nation should listen. In the second section, Nixon muses on the values that enabled him to survive and recover from his downfall (family, religion, teachers, the virtues of struggle, and the need to use wealth for good purposes). The third and fourth sections, the core of the book, offer advice for life and politics, and the fifth deals with the great issues and causes of his times. The final section, “Twilight,” is a valediction to the virtues of living a full life, even in old age, and accepting the risk of setbacks in the cause of pursuing worthwhile goals.

The final sentences read: “In the end, what matters is that you have always lived life to the hilt. I have been on the highest mountains, and the deepest valleys, but I have never lost sight of my destination – a world in which peace and freedom can live together. I have won some great victories and suffered some devastating defeats. But win or lose, I feel fortunate to have come to that time in life when I can finally enjoy what my Quaker grandmother would have called ‘peace at the center.’” This serenity implicitly links Nixon with the contemporaneous ending of the Cold War that he wanted seen as

being his legacy as much as Ronald Reagan's. Nevertheless, his peace of mind entails refusal to admit the full extent of his misdeeds. Watergate, which occupied so much of his previous memoir, is now dismissed as "one part wrongdoing, one part blundering, and one part political vendetta." While admitting that he should have set "a higher standard for the conduct of the people who participated in my campaign and administration," he still insists that he only played by "the rules of politics as I found them. Not taking a higher road than my predecessors and my adversaries was my central mistake" (Nixon 1990: 368–69, 40, 41). In other words, Nixon's behavior was the norm in the amoral political arena but his exceptional purpose in doing wrong was to acquire the power necessary to do good.

Redemption and Damnation: Post-Watergate Biographies

Four of the nine Nixon biographies written since he resigned the presidency reflect authorial admiration or disdain for him and stake little claim to historical objectivity. Significantly, the three favorable studies came from the pen of non-Americans, possibly suggesting that it was easier for outsiders to give more weight to Nixon's virtues than his vices than was the case for his fellow Americans. Also of interest, personal experience endowed each of the authors with a strong interest in redemption for law-breakers.

British Labor peer Lord Longford, a devout Catholic and socialist, was a campaigner for UK penal reform and spent the last three years of his life trying to win parole for the so-called "Moors Murderess," Myra Hindley (Stanford 2001). Jonathan Aitken, a Conservative MP (1974–97) and Chief Secretary to the Treasury in John Major's Cabinet in 1994–95, went to prison for perjury in 1999 (serving seven months of an eighteen-month sentence). Although his Nixon biography predated his downfall, he showed an affinity with his subject for not telling the truth, which prompted the collapse of a libel action he brought in 1997 against *The Guardian* newspaper and the *World in Action* television program over allegations of his involvement in a Saudi arms scam. Turning to religion during his imprisonment (where he was visited by Lord Longford), Aitken engaged in study of theology and campaigned for penal reform after his release (Aitken 2006). Finally, Canadian media baron Conrad Black, owner of the third largest newspaper group in the world, was sentenced to six years in prison by a US judge for criminal fraud and obstruction of justice in 2007, shortly after publication of his Nixon biography (Quinn and Pierce 2007). Anyone reading Longford and Black on Nixon is struck by their personal investment in his humanity and capacity for greatness in spite of his flaws. Meanwhile Aitken's insistence that Nixon's high ideals were the strongest current in his river of life despite its occasional passages "through strange ill-smelling pools" could also stand as his own hoped-for valediction (Aitken 1993: 577).

Longford's book was written with the aid of interviews with convicted Watergate conspirator (and born-again Christian) Charles Colson and Nixon press secretary Ray Price, as well as two meetings with the ex-president himself. Appearing at the time that Nixon was putting his own foreign policy in positive light, notably in *The Real War*, it largely supports the ex-president's assessment of his dealings with the communist world as a shrewd combination of détente for peace and parity for survival. While accepting that Nixon did wrong, the author continually believes the best of him and never fully grasps the enormity of what Watergate constituted. Thus Longford concludes, "If there is one quality which, in addition to the longing to be great, emerges from his memoirs and diaries, it is the longing to be good, the desire for self-improvement." For him, this was a legacy of Nixon's Quaker upbringing – "his formation was exceptionally religious, his life dominated by family, church and school" (Longford 1980: 191).

Jonathan Aitken's study is the closest we have to an authorized biography of Nixon, who granted him sixty hours of interviews and extensive (but not complete) access to his papers. In many respects, the themes of the biography update those of the pre-Watergate genre. Devoting nearly two-thirds of his book to the pre-presidential Nixon, Aitken emphasizes his rise from modest origins, his fortitude in the Hiss case, and his resiliency in dealing with crises and setbacks in his career. The presidential section attempts to strike a balance between recognition of Nixon's Watergate wrongdoings (narrowly defined in terms of obstruction of justice rather than abuse of power) and his achievements as peacemaker and international statesman. It concludes with the hope that Nixon would eventually receive recognition as America's finest foreign-policy president of the twentieth century to provide a more even balance in the scales of judgment still unfairly weighted by his presidential disgrace. "That," Aitken affirmed, "is the least he deserves" (Aitken 1993: 577).

By far the best pro-Nixon biography is that by Conrad Black, previously the author of a much-praised life of Franklin D. Roosevelt. Provided this is read with the author's rehabilitative intent in mind, it makes a worthy contribution to the Nixon literature. Black's former eminence in the publishing world gave him access to his subject, whom he interviewed on several occasions, and many individuals connected with the Nixon administration. This at once represents a strength and weakness of the book. Black has a good understanding of leadership and power that informs his advocacy of Nixon, but he is also too prone to pontificate on how he would have handled matters more effectively had he been in Nixon's shoes.

Black is keen to defend Nixon over the two dark spots of his presidential career, Vietnam and Watergate. On Vietnam he challenges the view that Nixon's prolonged running down of the war alongside intermittent escalations was one of the worst mistakes by a Cold War president because it resulted in huge losses of American lives and treasure while giving the

North Vietnamese cause to outwait the United States in the expectation of its ultimate withdrawal. Though critical of Nixon for not implementing his threat to use huge force in 1969 unless Hanoi became more accommodating in peace talks, Black commends his handling of the war. In his estimate, it served to show North Vietnam that the United States would not accept humiliating defeat and reassure the Saigon regime that American air power would shield it once ground troops were fully withdrawn (a promise supposedly betrayed by a lily-livered Democratic Congress).

In like fashion, Black defends Nixon in Watergate as guilty of little more than intelligence-gathering misdemeanors common in previous Democratic administrations and excessive trust in subordinates who counseled him badly with regard to cover-up efforts. One does not have to be a Nixon basher to be uncomfortable with this analysis. It keeps the historical lens on the obstruction-of-justice issue, as Nixon preferred, and tends to underplay his abuses of power that were quantitatively and qualitatively of a different scale than those practiced by previous occupants of the White House.

At 1,059 pages of text, the book could have done with tighter editing to reduce its length, but important episodes in Nixon's career are still given short shrift, notably his record on civil rights that manifested important innovations in public-school desegregation and affirmative action. In contrast, Nixon's handling of the economy comes in for somewhat dubious praise – perhaps it was done in politically skilled fashion to win re-election but many would question its success in policy terms (the best defense for Nixon is that no one had the answer for stagflation in the 1970s). On foreign policy Black does not explore Nixon's embrace of the Shah of Iran and the consequences of tying America dangerously close to his regime from 1972 onwards. He also glosses over US involvement in the Chilean coup of 1973 and the consequent human-rights abuses by the American-backed Pinochet regime. Overall, Black is only interested in Nixon as a player in the great power stakes – his faulty understanding of the Third World, notably black Africa, receives little or no consideration.

Overall, Black's book demonstrates one of the particular difficulties of Nixon revisionism. His subject's peculiar mix of good and bad makes him a difficult subject for favorable reinterpretation. In moving the pendulum too far in that direction, Black glosses over the all-too-evident shortcomings that journalist Anthony Summers (2000), in the most critical biography yet written, was equally guilty of emphasizing to the exclusion of Nixon's achievements.

A British journalist, Summers shows none of the admiration for Nixon evident in the writing of fellow countrymen Longford and Aitken. Intended as a riposte to emergent revisionism, his biography relentlessly portrays a man whose inner demons destroyed his presidency and damaged his country. Instead of the idealist found in hagiographic studies, the Nixon that comes forth from its pages is driven by a lifelong addiction to intrigue,

conspiracy, and power that made Watergate the fitting culmination of his career. Summers depicts his subject as prone to emotional and mental instability, a heavy drinker, a wife beater, in thrall to shadowy figures from whom he had accepted campaign contributions (notably reclusive billionaire Howard Hughes), and connected to the Mafia underworld. The book is based on over a thousand interviews, many with Nixon administration insiders, but some of the most sensational claims are poorly documented, especially those of wife beating. Its account of Nixon's drinking (except in the final days of his presidency) also appears exaggerated. According to many who knew him, it appears more likely that Nixon drank sparingly but had low tolerance for alcohol. Other facets of Nixon's dark side are better done. Summers is particularly good on his illegal maneuverings to sabotage the Johnson administration's election-eve efforts for a Vietnam peace deal in 1968 and his abuse of power as president. Almost absent, however, is consideration of Nixon's domestic- and foreign-policy records in office and their historical significance. Doggedly concerned to portray what his book's subtitle calls Richard Nixon's *secret world*, Summers does not cast enough light on the *real world* that his subject was both shaped by and in turn helped to shape.

Scholarly Biographies

A new genre of Nixon books emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s that can be categorized for the purposes of this chapter as scholarly biographies. Not all the authors were professional historians but their work conformed to scholarly convention in striving for objectivity, consulting available archival sources and seeking to contextualize their subject within his times.

Stephen Ambrose, the eminent biographer and affirmed admirer of Dwight Eisenhower, produced a three-volume study of Nixon, someone whom he had never admired and was initially reluctant to write about. At some 1,900 pages of text in aggregate, his is certainly the longest Nixon biography – and arguably the best. It suffers from a somewhat old-fashioned chronological construct that sometimes obscures thematic analysis, but provides generally sound judgments of its subject's strengths and weaknesses. The first volume, dealing with Nixon's life up to 1962, debunks psychobiographic orthodoxy in portraying his family background as his making rather than undoing and attributes his rapid rise in politics to a combination of ability, capacity for hard work and quick learning, and ruthlessness as a campaigner. The second volume, dealing with the 1962–72 period, faults Nixon's refusal to withdraw quickly from Vietnam in order to protect America's credibility with the communist world despite his awareness that the war could not be won. As such, it bears re-reading in light of

Barack Obama's dilemma about maintaining or withdrawing from military involvement in Afghanistan. For Ambrose, however, the essential ambiguity of Nixon's presidential record is manifest in his bold opening to China and détente with the Soviets and his frequent law-breaking to combat his enemies at home. This underlies his ambivalent assessment that a president capable of doing such good and such wrong deserved both re-election and repudiation in 1972.

The final volume is in many ways the least satisfactory of the trilogy. The chronological approach seeks to make the narrative of the Watergate investigation into "the political story of the century," but a thematic analysis would have better established its significance (Ambrose 1991: 91). More problematically, Ambrose chooses to sign off not with an assessment of Nixon's place in the history of his times but with the effect of his resignation on the 1980s. His 1991 assessment of its consequences for Reagan's America has not stood the test of time well. Reading it, one cannot help but lament that he did not assess whether Nixon's actual time in the political spotlight from 1946 to 1974 could be characterized as the Age of Nixon, as journalist Anthony Lewis had suggested on his protagonist's resignation, or even, as Senator Bob Dole (R-KS) would later remark at the ex-president's funeral in 1994, whether the entire second half of the twentieth century should be so known (Lewis 1974; Dole 1994).

Three other biographies also appeared shortly afterward, each distinguished by an effort to place Richard Nixon in the context of his America. *New York Times* journalist Tom Wicker's 1991 book has interest as a revisionist biography by a member of the liberal media whom Nixon once considered his sworn enemy. Valuing skill over character in a politician, he credits his subject with achieving much more through political calculation than an avowedly moral president like Jimmy Carter. Wicker acknowledges that Nixon's political career and its Watergate culmination dramatized the capacity of power to corrupt, but places the denouement in relation to the development of the imperial presidency under his predecessors. Ultimately, he sees Nixon as more typical of America than abnormally bad because he embodied the dark, struggling, realistic side of the nation rather than its rational and romantic one.

Wicker relied on his personal reporting for insights on Nixon, thereby making the presidential section the best part of his biography. Drawing on archival sources (especially oral history), former Nixon administration national security official Roger Morris is wholly concerned with his old boss's early life in the first volume of a planned trilogy (Morris 1990). Offering possibly the best account of the formative years, he portrays the Nixon family in positive light – even father Frank comes out better than the ill-tempered loser of standard fare – and more middle class than Nixon presented in his own memoirs. In contrast, Nixon himself is unflatteringly portrayed as a political hack rather than Machiavelli-in-waiting, evil or not.

In Morris's estimate, he was a California provincial with ambitions confined to winning office rather than statecraft and idealism. As such he was the product of the Golden State's political culture that featured candidate-centered politics, independent fund raising and outside political managers. Whether this fully explains Nixon's meteoric rise from freshman congressman to vice-presidential candidate, the end point of the book, is open to question. It is, however, regrettable that Morris has not yet produced the remaining volumes of the project. These might have illuminated his implicit case that the political skills Nixon drew from his California background to succeed in the 1940s and 1950s ultimately resulted in personal and national disaster in the 1970s.

Historian Herbert Parmet (1990) sees clear links between Nixon's pre-presidential and presidential careers in his one-volume biography that drew on hitherto unavailable archival sources and four interviews with Nixon himself to present its subject as representative of national rather than state impulse. Far from being the inauthentic man portrayed by Gary Wills, the Herblock "tricky Dick" sewer rat, or the warped persona of psychobiographers, his Nixon is real and constant in his identity.

To Parmet, Nixon exhibited not a fixed ideological base but "a secular faith in success by perseverance" and belief that he "would, somehow, prove the durability of the American Dream." As such, his values personified those of the children of the New Deal generation, who rediscovered confidence in American capitalism and traditional values, particularly the work ethic. He was the guardian of "their intent to secure a piece of the American turf, or their idea of the American dream, and to do so without losing out to those who insisted on changing the rules in the middle of the game by grabbing advantages not available to earlier generations" (Parmet 1990: viii). In defense of this "working middle-class" constituency, Nixon was a centrist who accepted the need for government programs, looked to steer the GOP onto a middle course, opposed the excesses and distortions of welfare-state liberalism, and hewed to a nationalist (i.e. realist) course in foreign policy. Parmet is clear that the age of Nixon was characterized by his protagonist's effort to chart a middle-way course between traditional Republicanism and modern liberalism to deal with the socio-economic and international challenges facing postwar America. This rich and fascinating study only works up to a point, however. How Watergate fits into its thesis is never properly explained. Parmet resolves the conundrum largely by ignoring what he calls a scandal, a term that implicitly downplays its significance. As such, his biography confirms two things: there was certainly more to Nixon than Watergate but his life cannot be understood without addressing what brought about the unique downfall of his career in politics.

Paradoxically, the first wave of scholarly biographies has not been followed by a second wave. It is tempting to speculate that historians have been more engaged in mining the increasingly available Nixon records to

examine specific political and policy aspects of his career rather than his overall life. The only scholarly biography to appear since 1991 is the present author's short volume (Morgan 2002). Based on published sources, this was intended as a review of the state of historical knowledge on Nixon and an assessment of his historical significance, largely targeted at a student readership. It was revisionist, but only up to a point. While recognizing the importance of Watergate in Nixon's story, the book was more concerned to evaluate the whole of his substantive record. In line with recent scholarship, it suggested that Nixon's domestic policies were more significant and successful than his foreign policy, and recognized his vital role in the rebuilding of the Republican Party (Hoff 1994; Small 1999). Ultimately this study defines without resolving the essential problem of any Nixon biography to assess the weighting that should be given to the positive and negative personal attributes that made him so distinct. It concludes, "Nixon was *both* much better *and* much worse than the norm [for US politicians]. He had exceptional ability, exceptional intelligence, and exceptional vision. Yet no other leading figure of postwar politics was as lacking in moral scruple as Nixon, lied as often as he did or matched his determination to win at any cost. No one else was so subject to the allure of power or so prone to misuse it" (Morgan 2002: 194).

Where Next?

If there is nothing close to a definitive biography of Nixon as yet, this is not to say that one can never be written. For the majority of professional historians who have written about Nixon, whether in terms of biographical or monographic studies, Watergate was history lived through. With the passage of time, and particularly as a new generation of post-Watergate scholars emerges, they are likely to become more dispassionate in seeing Nixon anew as history examined rather than experienced. The increasingly easy access to the span of Nixon papers also encourages hope that a definitive biography will eventually emerge – and sooner rather than later.

Without wishing to be prescriptive about the work of others but speaking as a Nixon biographer, I venture to suggest that such a volume should have at least three essential features and one highly desirable one. First, it should base its analysis as far as is possible on research in the available Nixon archives. Second, it should strike a judicious balance between assessment of his accomplishments and misdeeds. Any revisionist recognition of the former cannot discount the significance of the latter. Third, it should focus far more on what Nixon did and the significance of this for America's postwar development than on what his reputation symbolized or how his inner demons shaped him. There is surely more than enough of substance in the formation of Nixon's political character up to 1946, his foreign- and

domestic-policy records during a nearly thirty-year political career, his partisan role in the development of the GOP from 1946 to the mid-1970s, and his use and misuse of presidential power to merit making such issues the focus of biographical analysis.

Making extensive use of Nixon's private papers, historian Irwin Gellman has examined his congressional career as the first part of a revisionist multi-volume political biography (Gellman 1999). Gellman argues that he did not start out in politics the way he eventually became but quickly recognized how guile, sharp practice, and vitriolic rhetoric was the way to get ahead in the postwar partisan environment. How this thesis relates to the later volumes remains to be seen, but the ten years that have passed since the publication of the first make the wait long and ongoing.

Perhaps this indicates another fundamental problem of Nixon biography (and of most leadership biographies) in that definitive quality is seemingly assumed to entail quantity as well. At a time when the study of history and the people who made it is more vital than ever to help Americans put current problems in context, the production of massive, multi-volume biographies is unlikely to engage much of a readership outside the narrow spectrum of professional scholars. Ultimately, therefore, a highly desirable quality in future Nixon biography should be reasonable brevity. It must surely be possible to tell the story of his life and times in a single volume of fewer than five hundred pages without sacrificing essential analytic quality. As a recent study of Lincoln has so well demonstrated, great biography and conciseness are not incompatible terms (Carwardine 2006).

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