

R I C H A R D

N I X O N

A N D H I S

A M E R I C A

HERBERT S. PARMET

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Herbert S. Parmet

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For
DANIEL PARMET LANOUE
Who Will Know the Future

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Preface

BIOGRAPHY is not the primary force behind this book. The chronicling tendencies of a Boswell have been put aside for a broader purpose: to take up the history, both cultural and political, of the era we have passed through. It is an era that has gone from the Great Depression and Franklin D. Roosevelt to the consequences of overcoming economic disaster and the horrors of a world at war. We have picked up the pieces from those two experiences and have moved on to a future hardly imagined in our youth.

Almost from the start of the postwar period, there have been endless exhumations of the Nixon personality, and he has come down to us in various reincarnations. Most of all, he is familiar as an American version of that ancient Roman conspirator Catiline, or a Clyde Griffiths, the unfortunate protagonist of *An American Tragedy*, who was the victim, as Theodore Dreiser described it, not only of his own needs but of the society as well.

The point here is to understand why Richard Nixon has been such a commanding figure. A combination of timing, skill, and the workings of the historical process introduced him to the American political scene in 1946 and, in the 1970s and 1980s — despite Watergate, despite the resignation, despite the pejorative implications of the pardon — sustained his viability long after he had been discredited.

His era, from his California beginnings and the Voorhis campaign of 1946, spanned the postwar world both at home and abroad. Between Roosevelt and the period that has followed his own presidency — during, in other words, the vital years between the Age of Roosevelt and what Kevin Phillips has noted became “postconservative America” — Nixon’s political function was to rationalize two ongoing developments, the progressivism of the New Deal welfare state and the continuing cold war. Nixon has always seen himself as something of a broker playing this role

during thirty years of conflict. Contrary to the view engraved in our minds through the cartoons of Herblock, and contrary to the view of many of us who have followed the Republican party, at heart he has always been less the political partisan than a centrist. His emphasis did not assume that the various levels of government could or should fail to protect those who were victimized by the system. Even when he was most identified as an orthodox Republican, his role was to try to steer the Republican party along a middle course, somewhere between the competitive impulses of the Rockefellers, the Goldwaters, and the Reagans.

Nixon personified the children of the New Deal generation who regained confidence in American capitalism. They rediscovered the values that seemed to have gone askew. Nixon keenly reflected the priorities that were especially important to those we may identify as the working middle class. They saw in Nixon not a figure of glamor at all, but someone closer to the real gut: a 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. This was not only the coming of age of the great middle-class majority; we must also understand it as a process of acculturation and assimilation by generations of immigrants. They achieved their security, had faith in the American dream, and contributed a conservative, stabilizing force in the context of American traditionalism.

When reviewing postwar America, then, I believe that Richard Nixon was, in the long run, less distinctive for the peculiarities of his psychological makeup than for his attitudes toward both foreign and domestic policies. He provided leadership for a wide variety of second- and third-generation ethnic groups and older-line Republican stalwarts in protecting their interests from the excesses and abuses of welfare state liberalism. At the same time, the Democratic party further polarized society by appearing to become the captive of dissidents and outsiders who were looking to the federal government for special privileges. Those who had made it through the postwar period were now concerned with consolidating their arrival and protecting it. Nixon hoped to bring together a bipartisan coalition of entrepreneurialists of various racial, ethnic, and class stripes, all bound together in a strong adherence to traditionalism and a very strong sense of American nationalism.

This book is concerned with one who came along not as just another ambitious, self-serving politician but as a leader who tapped the underlying zones of American discontent. Inevitably, the approach subordinates conventional biography to what I think is more significant and useful, the story of how, in his own overtly nationalistic appeal, he harnessed the unease that lay just below the surface of celebratory blessings

of the American existence. To understand Richard Nixon is to attain a more useful comprehension of the thrust of our political culture.

He consented to sit for this portrait. He granted four interviews, eased my access to his family and associates, made available documents that have remained within his private control, and responded to questions that came up during the nearly six years devoted to this book. He never expressed the right to review the manuscript, nor was such an offer made. The only understanding was an implicit one: that a historian of the recent American past take advantage of the perspective of time to further understandings that were inhibited by the passions that dominated the dialogue during his years in public life.

Thus, Richard Nixon, reading this book along with the general public, will find that he emerges from its pages as noteworthy in ways that are not always recognizable from the Herblockian images of the man. There have been, first of all, no truly "new" Nixons. There has been one coherent, consistent Nixon, one whose commitment to what he called "practical liberalism" was unwavering throughout the second half of the twentieth century. Just as consistent was his closeness to the culture of conservative populism, one that saw an idealized vision of capitalism and the demands of entrepreneurialism.

From the end of the war until the rise of the New Right and its capture of the White House, the character of American politics and diplomacy was shaped by the essentials that were common to the Age of Nixon. It was an age of contention. It was an age of uncertainty about the role America could and should play in a confusing and dangerous world. The story of this age transcends the man; it in fact takes us back to the America of the great centennial celebration of 1876 and moves forward to the bicentennial year of 1976, when Richard Nixon expected to lead the nation's celebration.

It is my hope that this account will encourage a more mature level of political analysis by moving away from an obsessive infatuation with the individual and toward an attempt to understand the larger forces that have constituted our political culture.

Acknowledgments

GRATITUDE may seem not only self-evident but perhaps somewhat redundant, but I would prefer to be trite than cavalier. Much has gone into this, and many have made it possible.

The Federal Archives continue to be the basic source, especially those branches that house the Nixon Pre-Presidential Papers at Laguna Niguel, California, and, for the White House years, the Nixon Presidential Materials Project at Alexandria, Virginia. Essential help was given at those repositories by Diane Nixon, Fred Klose, and Joan Howard. Loie G. Gaunt put in many additional hours sorting through the non-deeded papers so generously made available by President Nixon. Sue Ellen Stanley was very helpful and gracious in assisting with a number of requests. The staffs of the Eisenhower and Lyndon Johnson libraries were also of great help, especially John Wickman, Karen Rohrer, Linda Hansen, and Nancy Smith.

Any inquiry into the early years of Richard Nixon must invariably lead to the Richard Nixon Project of the California State University at Fullerton, where I was assisted by Shirley E. Stephenson and had the good fortune to benefit from the compilations that had been organized by Harry P. Jeffrey.

Former president Nixon made himself available for several interviews and helped me gain access to some of his present and former associates. Mr. Nixon's assistant, John H. Taylor, was extremely helpful and courteous in providing information and keeping me up to date, and Carlos Narvaez guided me through some of the presidential papers.

John Ehrlichman and Leonard Garment were kind enough to make their documents available for this project, and Julie Nixon Eisenhower went through the trouble of sending me a copy of the biography of her mother in manuscript in advance of publication. Maurice Stans and Harry Dent provided me with their publications, while Russell Kirk

graciously forwarded copies of his correspondence with Richard Nixon. Rabbi Baruch Korff gave me access to the correspondence of the Committee for Fairness to the Presidency, now housed at Brown University. The many others who consented to personal or telephone interviews are listed in the bibliography.

Additional material was ferreted out with diligence and generosity by David Oshinsky, Alonzo Hamby, Nancy Bressler, William Mulligan, Ellen Malino James, Michael Sappol, John White, and Gordon Brooks. I was also fortunate to draw from and be guided by the work of several of my graduate students at the City University of New York, notably Lenore Laupheimer, Jeff Schneider, and Mario Margolies. At the library in my community, Hillsdale, New York, where most of this book was written, Carol Briggs was often helpful in locating hard-to-find books. It was also useful to have access to the facilities at Simon's Rock College at Great Barrington, Massachusetts, and Columbia-Greene Community College at Hudson, New York. Most basic and essential, however, was the help given by my colleagues in the History Department and the administration of my undergraduate school, Queensborough Community College, as well as the graduate school library, both of the City University of New York. To my colleagues at both institutions I owe much for the time, support, and research assistance so vital for this work. The National Endowment for the Humanities helped to defray some of the costs with a useful and timely travel grant.

Joan Parmet not only withstood the difficulties and pressures involved in all this work, as she has in the past, but also provided important help at a number of repositories. She, along with Marie B. Hecht, read through every line of the manuscript, and both did so with editorial pencil in hand. They helped ease the way toward a more readable manuscript, as did Wendy Parmet, who gave me time from her own hectic schedule.

My editor at Little, Brown, Ray Roberts, made this book possible by his confidence in my original proposal, as did my agent, Timothy Seldes. I have also been especially well served by the astute and exacting editorial work of Peggy Leith Anderson, who has kept me on the right track and, at a number of points, from wandering into deep holes. There can be no one better than she at this demanding work. Glenn Speer of the graduate school of the City University of New York took time from his own labors on Richard Nixon and foreign policy and gave me some exceptionally knowledgeable and diligent help, especially during the final preparations of the manuscript. I could hardly have been better served.

*Herbert S. Parmet
Hillsdale, New York
July 6, 1989*

Contents

	<i>Preface</i>	<i>vii</i>
	<i>Acknowledgments</i>	<i>xi</i>
1	Sunrise with Lincoln	3
2	The Thirty-seventh President	14
3	Two Centuries, One Nation	30
4	In the Land of the Golden Bear	50
5	A New Day for the Twelfth	89
6	The Game of Grub	115
7	The Great Awakening	151
8	Breaking Through	182
9	The Ideal Running Mate	216
10	Dick and Ike	252
11	The Global Vice President	297
12	Heir Apparent	324
13	Does It Make a Difference?	360
14	A Two-Time Loser	403
15	Revolt of the Red-Diaper Babies	438
16	Men on Horseback	467
17	Resurrection	502
18	"I'm Not a Mushy Moderate"	529
19	"Tell It to Hanoi"	562
20	The Zigs and the Zags	594
21	The Age of Nixon	621
	Epilogue	647
	<i>Notes</i>	<i>651</i>
	<i>Bibliography</i>	<i>705</i>
	<i>Index</i>	<i>728</i>

R I C H A R D
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A N D H I S
AMERICA

1

Sunrise with Lincoln

SEARCHLIGHT” was on the lawn, tracked by the Secret Service monitoring post at the Old Executive Office Building. His location was hardly unusual, but the hour, before five in the morning, was. Nothing had been done to prepare anyone for a special, unorthodox mission. Egil “Bud” Krogh, the White House aide in charge of security for that day, May 9, had assumed all was normal. The word that Searchlight, the code name for the president of the United States, was up and about before sunrise called for an immediate response.

“My role that night,” Krogh later explained, “was basically to be sure that all proper preparations had been made for White House security,” for which the full range of protective force had been set into place: the Secret Service, the District of Columbia National Guard, the Executive Protective Service, and the General Services Administration.¹ The danger was not expected at dawn but later, at demonstrations on the Ellipse, the large grassy oval between the White House and the Washington Monument.

For the national capital in 1970, confrontation had become routine. Now the White House was at the center. Fifty-nine city buses were lined up bumper to bumper around the Executive Mansion. “It was a lot easier having buses out there than people,” explained Krogh, who had helped develop the plan in anticipation of having the biggest rebellion of all take place right on the streets of the capital.²

The crisis had been simmering for at least two weeks, but the coming showdown was nearly a decade old. Across the country, campuses were in turmoil. Bands of students trapped faculty and administrative personnel in their offices. In California, a branch of the Bank of America went up in flames.³ On April 4, 1968, nearly a year before Richard Nixon became president, civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was murdered. “Shoot to kill,” Chicago’s mayor Richard Daley ordered po-

licemen pursuing looters. Also in the wake of the assassination, a black neighborhood was reduced to rubble in the national capital. By the time Democrats met in Chicago that year to choose an opponent to run against Nixon, Robert Kennedy, their leading candidate, had also been gunned down. Outside the convention hall, up and down Michigan Avenue and in front of the Conrad Hilton Hotel, one mindless fury met another as students and hardened activists pushed the city's law enforcement officers into their own riot. "Bring Us Together" was the appropriate theme of that winning 1968 campaign, but since Nixon had taken office, the rebellions had become even more intense; Nixon's America had neither calmed down nor engaged in civil dialogue.

It had not even responded very much to his leadership. His expectation, as he scribbled on a yellow pad only three weeks after being sworn in, was to become a "Strong in charge President." Since then, however, a year had gone by. He had, by his own estimate, accomplished a great deal, certainly as much as Jack Kennedy had done in *his* first year, and without a Bay of Pigs disaster. JFK had the press with him all the way, and public relations milking every bit of glory. How could he compete if the press refused to give *him* any credit? He was, he decided, the only "strong" president "not revered" by most journalists.⁴

The nature of holding public office, of course, requires popular support. In Nixon's case, concern with image, undoubtedly exacerbated by the Kennedy precedent, became obsessive. He added up other things that the press had ignored: his tolerant treatment of the staff; new social events in the White House; consideration shown opponents. But he noted, in taking stock, he had not done enough to promote his own handling of the presidency, including the image of a hardworking chief executive. He had to put in more time at night. Rarely did he work only one or two hours after eight. His "big play" on November 3, 1969, his speech to the "silent majority" on the need for "peace with honor" in Vietnam, could have yielded even better mileage with more thorough background work. Even his press conferences, he realized, were unsatisfactory, possibly further weakened by the absence of planted questions that could be asked by friendly newsmen.⁵

Once he made the decision to go into Cambodia, he confided to himself that "Every day is the *last* — *make it count*." Perhaps this might arouse the sense of purpose in his entire staff; it was a big decision, and if he made it right, there should be "no concern over fluctuation in popularity polls." Old friend Bebe Rebozo had been properly encouraging. While waiting at an elevator door, the man whom the press was pegging as the only one who really had the president's full confidence told him, "This is the big play."⁶ It would be dramatic, bold, controversial; above all, it was the right thing to do, to capture the North Vietnamese sanctuary in Cambodia, destroy their headquarters, and relieve the pressures along

the Mekong River Valley. There would, he assumed, be the usual protests, but no one could then fault the president for any lack of courage. No, as Bebe agreed, it would demonstrate his ability to make the big play, to assume the decisiveness any president worth his salt needs to employ.

But the April 30 announcement of the "Cambodian incursion" kicked up more hell than even he had expected. Protesters again took to the streets and campuses, raising a din that exceeded anything that had gone before. The man who allegedly had a secret plan for ending the war had instead widened it. The radicalization of dissent seemed complete. Just a few days later, after a night of rioting and fires at the campus of Kent State University in Ohio, four young protesters were killed by National Guardsmen, who had been sent by Governor James Rhodes to restore order. Hundreds of miles away, at Jackson State College in Mississippi, police fired indiscriminately into the dormitory of black women students, killing two and wounding nine. "I think we have to recognize that there is a great deal of fear among adults today and that the feeling of opposition to the war and the Cambodian strike runs deeper on the campus than has anything in recent years," advised a memo to the president from his director of communications. "The daily news reports conveyed a sense of turmoil bordering on insurrection," Nixon later wrote in his memoirs.⁷

Violence even reached the heart of conservative stability, New York City's Wall Street financial center. On Friday, May 8, student antiwar demonstrators, attempting to attract lunch-hour street traffic, were suddenly assaulted by a band of construction workers. Wearing hard hats, which had become the badge of their trade and symbol of counterdissent, they chased the youngsters through the mob of amazed spectators, battering heads whenever they could and scattering the victims throughout the downtown canyons, wounding about seventy before it was all over.

The police (who afterward explained that they were no match for the workers' army) stood with mixed feelings of horror and delight as the hard hats then took off toward city hall. Meanwhile, another angry mob, provoked by missile-throwing students, invaded Pace University, smashing windows with crowbars and clubs and lashing out at those who blocked their way. Other workers ripped off a Red Cross banner at the gate of Trinity Church because they mistook it for a Vietcong flag. Dr. John M. Butler, the rector of the Episcopal church, quickly locked the gates to safeguard the building.⁸

Nixon's postmortem account of those agitated days conveyed a detachment that can variously be described as offering brave, strong, determined leadership; or, to critics, a presidential response that was indifferent and insensitive to the rebellions tearing the nation he had vowed to reunite. Apprehensive about the forthcoming protest of May

9, he wrote, "I felt that we should do everything possible to make sure that this event was nonviolent and that we did not appear insensitive to it."⁹ Still, the tactic was to avoid the *appearance* that he was too worried. Nixon the man was in conflict with Nixon the resolute leader. For the sake of history, Henry Kissinger, then adviser for national security affairs, would have to be the hard-liner against the demonstrators, counseling inflexibility until after the completion of the Cambodian operation, while the president cautioned that foreign policy must not be dictated by street protests. Nevertheless, his personal agitation was greater than he would dare reveal.

Reluctant and ambivalent, he had agreed to a suggestion from John Ehrlichman. The White House adviser's son, a Stanford student, had persuaded his father that Nixon should agree to meet with six young men from Kent State who had driven all the way from Ohio to see the president. Nixon's first response was no: the potential for precedents was mind-boggling. Nothing good could come from that kind of session, especially with public opinion adamant against campus rebels. Finally, as Ehrlichman recalls, the president gave in. Shortly after ten-thirty on the morning of Wednesday, May 6, the young men entered the Oval Office.¹⁰

They were mostly tongue-tied before the president. During one full hour, the communication hardly went beyond halting, embarrassing exchanges. The students, despite their obvious agitation, remained frozen in the presence of the chief executive. Nixon himself found the session trying and unproductive, a test of patience rather than a valuable encounter. His initial reluctance had been justified, and any additional meetings would debase the process. "Why did you put me through it?" was the question Ehrlichman sensed from Nixon afterward. "It was very awkward," recalls Ehrlichman.¹¹

Still, the encounter received positive exposure. The student delegation, all between the ages of twenty-one and twenty-four, was able to speak more openly later when facing the press. "All six were well-dressed and clean shaven," reported Robert B. Semple, Jr.'s *New York Times* dispatch. In 1970, that description of student dissenters was itself deemed newsworthy. Apparently better composed in front of the press, they revealed that their grievances went beyond unhappiness over Cambodia. Their encounters with the adult world were unsatisfactory, from the faculty and administration on their campus to decisions being made in Washington. The president listened carefully, they said, and outlined how future unhappiness could be minimized. The White House then also ordered Ehrlichman to prepare an analysis of a Justice Department report on the Kent State tragedy.¹²

The president's session with the students was upstaged by dramatic reports of the closing of scores of colleges. At the same time, unhappiness

within the cabinet became public in the form of a letter to Mr. Nixon from Interior Secretary Walter J. Hickel. Hickel, a convert to the cause of environmentalism and already increasingly isolated from the administration, charged that there was a lack of “appropriate concern for the attitude of a great mass of Americans — our young people.” They, like himself, were being shut off from the government. The vice president had made them an easy target, treated their motives with contempt, a tactic, wrote Hickel, that “can serve little purpose other than to further cement those attitudes to a solidity impossible to penetrate with reason.” The president himself was urged to begin a round of dialogues with individual members of his cabinet.¹³ Only one thing was becoming clear: the price of the Cambodian invasion was greater than anybody had anticipated. There was little good news from any quarter that Thursday.

Holding a press conference, then, seemed like the best way to break through. How better to dispel the impression of a remote, isolated president taking refuge in a White House bunker? Even if there were those around him who worried that it could backfire, that he might inadvertently feed the media grist for distortion, Nixon felt he had to take the initiative. He might at least diffuse tensions. So, on prime time that Friday night, only hours after the head-bashing in New York and Hickel’s well-advertised distress, the president went before the lights and cameras in the East Room.

He had not held a televised news conference for over three months. His discomfort was obvious. As he faced the newsmen, there was little of the administration’s by now familiar combative style, no hint of anything resembling Vice President Spiro Agnew’s verbal assaults. He was earnest, almost eager to please his critics. He understood their dismay. He shared their objectives. He, too, wanted to shorten the war.

His responses to questions from the newsmen were not adversarial. He supplied just the sort of information they wanted. The Cambodian invasion had gone better than expected, and he promised that 150,000 additional American troops would be withdrawn from South Vietnam by the spring. In response to whether he really intended to move from an era of confrontation with the Soviet Union to an era of negotiation, he predicted a significant agreement. “The Soviet Union,” he explained, “has just as great an interest as we have in seeing that there is some limitation on nuclear arms.” Then, in an obvious bid to identify with the concerns of youth, he recalled his own early days in Congress when, in opposition to President Truman, he, like the students, had “the luxury of criticism because they can criticize and if it doesn’t work out then they can gloat over it, or if it does work out, the criticism will be forgotten.” He had been there himself, and he knew how it felt.

Veteran correspondent Philip Potter of the *Baltimore Sun* then asked the president whether he thought that his use of the word “bums” in