

In Search of Nixon: A Psychohistorical Inquiry

by Bruce Mazlish

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Until recently the character of Richard Nixon posed no more significance for most of us than the true size of the sun: each a supposedly irrelevant dimension of a presence so basic to our lives we easily take it for granted. Then Watergate brought the sun menacingly close to earth, and suddenly this issue has taken on a special urgency. Enter Bruce Mazlish, psychohistorian, who will attempt to "deepen understanding of the meaning and significance of Nixon's behavior."

We may now trace Nixon's steadfast disavowal of any complicity in the scandal to, among other things, a "predilection for denial," which asserts itself in response to aggressive impulses which are "unacceptable" to the President because he unconsciously associates them with the childhood disappearance of his mother and the early deaths of two brothers. Richard Nixon's aloofness toward Congress, press and public, which Mazlish considers a contributing factor to Watergate, has much to do with a guilt-induced fear that "he will not be loved." And his ability to assume a wide variety of public roles, so much in evidence during television appearances subsequent to disclosures of the scandal, stems from an "insecurely held self," an inability to discover "who he really is."

There is much more along the same methodological lines; Mazlish's is a "problem approach" to biography which focuses, retrospectively, on recurring patterns and themes in a subject's life as they develop out of a reconstructed childhood. From this network of facts about Nixon, Mazlish hopes to extract new, heretofore hidden, meaning and significance.

But we never reach this final vantage point, and this is evident in the author's treatment of Watergate. Mazlish remains locked into the data of Nixon's life, collecting and labeling odds and ends that never add up. One hundred fifty pages of an exhaustive scavenger hunt and the reader's quest is unrewarded, for Mazlish struggles on with the same worn categories he constructed at the outset: Nixon as denier, role-player and ambivalent aggressor-pacifist. The facts Mazlish summons, for instance, Nixon's "anal" traits, merely feed upon themselves; they do not contribute to further understanding. What we finally grasp is an immense circularity: states of mind superimposed upon Nixon's childhood are shown to be at work in Nixon the politician, which are then assumed to be meaningful if they can be read back into childhood events.

By enclosing Nixon in this self-sustaining psychic world Mazlish leaves him functioning in a vacuum. The result is often a naive and absurd interpretation of political men and events. Nixon's turbulent but always self-serving relations with the Communist world are termed "ambivalent" in the psychoanalytic sense. This means, according to Mazlish, that Nixon both seeks peace sincerely (an identification with his Quaker mother's ideals) and vents an ingenuous, almost pathological, hatred on the Communists. Just when we begin to wonder how such a man could keep himself and our earth from exploding, Mazlish tells us that Nixon's ability to stabilize relations with Peking and Moscow may stem from his identification with the "amoral ruthlessness" of these countries (based on a long-

standing affinity with his fiercely competitive father); this is why Nixon has of late favored "hard" countries such as China and Russia over the "soft" democracies such as India and Japan. By concentrating on the policy-maker to the exclusion of the policy and its context, Mazlish ends up distorting both.

Contrast this with Garry Wills's *Nixon Agonistes*, with its attention to its subject's unscrupulous but joyless marketplace morality and its treatment of that morality as a cultural vestige, enabling us to see Nixon's rapport with the Soviets in terms of the latter's increasing avowal of a similar cultural ethic. Wills's portrayal of Nixon the man incorporates collective and historical themes to give us a broad and insightful picture. Mazlish's concerns are narrow and naive—how else characterize his repeated efforts to psychoanalyze Nixon's campaign speeches by hunting among the carefully articulated evasions for evidences of "denial"?

Mazlish has wrenched psychoanalytic terminology out of its context and applied it unthinkingly to an entirely different realm. The result is not only a frequent misapplication of terms (his use of "ambivalence" is a good example) but also in reification of the terms at the expense of their significative function. The metaphors and organizing concepts Freud used so dramatically and suggestively turn to stone in Mazlish's hands.

This suggests that the significance of the psychoanalytic perspective has to do, not with data and the labels applied to data, but with the meaning and symbolization that desire and prohibition assume for the individual. The philosopher Paul Ricoeur, author of *Freud and Philosophy*, says this and more: "[Psychoanalytic] interpretation does not uncover a real thing, not even a psychical thing; the desire to which interpretation refers us is itself a reference to the series of its derivatives and an endless self-symbolization." In the end we are referred back to the subject himself, who, by

living and working in the world, gives concreteness to his fantasies and understood meanings that are otherwise, in Ricoeur's phrase, only a "symbolizable absence." To attempt *this* kind of psychohistory obviously requires more than the heavy-handed and positivistic familiarity with psychoanalytic theory Mazlish has brought to bear in his search for Richard Nixon.

But why study a man like Nixon in the first place? Somehow the "meaning and significance" of the Nixon elaborated by Mazlish does not plug in at all to the excitement and concern generated by Watergate. Nixon is interesting only insofar as he is a *political* figure and symbol. Mazlish, despite his claims to the contrary, is unable to integrate personality and politics; the Nixon he presents is an individual of great "ambivalence" who just

happens to be President of the United States.

Just as the psyche can best be articulated in terms of the interplay of meaning between its various agencies, so political life is a fabric of interacting values and symbolizations. Nixon was created out of this fabric, and in his own extraordinary way he continues both to weave it and wear it thin. Wills, among others, has elaborated this beautifully. Mazlish is concerned with "facts": on the one hand, the facts of the Nixon biography; on the other, the historical facts of American politics. He then notes the amazing "fit" between these two apparently autonomous "corresponding processes." Result: a successful politician. But history is not an equation. If this means the reader "in search of Nixon" cannot expect answers, he deserves at least some insight.

ponent), buttressed with brief comparative applications to the revolutions in Bolivia (1952), Vietnam (1946-54) and France (1968).

In his first two chapters Rejai examines and evaluates existing definitions (including those of Carl J. Friedrich, Eugene Kamenka, Raymond Tanter and Manus Midlarsky, George S. Pettee, Chalmers Johnson and James N. Rosenau. Few will dispute his conclusions that the definitions are, alternatively, permissive, constraining, arbitrary or vague in failing to draw meaningful distinctions between political revolution, on the one hand, and coups, riots and rebellions on the other. His own eightfold criteria, summarized in the proposed definition of political revolution as "abrupt, illegal mass violence aimed at the overthrow of the political regime as a step toward over-all social change," are intentionally restrictive, narrowing the field of study to a rather small number of relatively modern political upheavals. Broad enough to encompass both successful and unsuccessful revolutions, his definition nonetheless implies the need for terms *other* than revolution to describe alternative forms of political violence.

Rejai sets forth to solve the typological dilemma by basing his classification upon the single criterion of the target or targets of political revolution, which he considers more distinct than alternative criteria (such as the identity of the revolutionaries, the ideology of the revolutionaries, the revolution's timing, the degree of mass participation, duration or level of violence). Differences among targets (or "enemies") provide a threefold classification of political revolution: civil, national and abortive. The civil revolution is mounted against a domestic political regime (Russia, 1917); the national revolution against a foreign power (Algeria, 1954-62); and the abortive revolution, marked by its failure to reach its target, may be either civil (France, 1968) or national (Hungary, 1956).

Rejai completes his theoretical section with a discussion of revolutionary strategy, defined as "the

The Strategy of Political Revolution by Mustafa Rejai

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Revolution is an inevitably contentious topic, not only because men differ fundamentally as to its merit, but because, in its variety and complexity, revolution defies the most imaginative and strenuous efforts either to explain its occurrence or to analyze its character. Apart from the fact that the term itself is applied rather loosely to describe changes in virtually everything from the style of dress to the style of government, even those theorists who more modestly confine their attention to *political* revolution encounter enormous difficulties in distinguishing from among events those which are strictly revolutionary and those which are not. Their bewilderment is evident in the proliferation of descriptive terms designating classes of political violence, such as revolutions from above and below,

great national revolutions, palace revolutions, jacqueries, mass insurrections, conspirational coups and millenarian rebellions. Then there is the matter of definition. Theorists approach the study of revolutionary phenomena from differing disciplinary perspectives, and tend to stress sociological, psychological or legal/political aspects. What one scholar considers essentially a challenge to constitutional authority, another may deem the result of intense social disequilibrium, while yet another may see at the root of revolutionary behavior psychic disturbance.

In *The Strategy of Political Revolution* Mustafa Rejai gives us a succinct statement of the problems involved in the study of political violence, a systematic exposition of his own conception of political revolution (focused on the strategic com-