

# Books

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The crisis is far from over

## Judging Nixon, Judging Ourselves

Donald Allen Robinson

We read books about Richard Nixon's Presidency and the scandals that brought it to an early end for two reasons. The first is to reconstruct what happened: when the misdeeds began, how they developed, why the cover-up failed, how Nixon was finally persuaded to resign.

The other reason is for insight into the meaning of this strange episode. At first nearly everyone agreed the episode proved that "the system works." By now this facile reaction, born of exhaustion and relief, is giving way to disturbing questions. How did we happen to choose as President a man whose understanding of our political traditions and constitutional system was so gravely flawed?

The challenge of this question is particularly acute for Theodore White, the great celebrator of the process by which we "make" our Presidents. In his new book, *Breach of Faith* (Atheneum; 373 pp.; \$10.95), his answer is that we chose him, and confirmed him in office by a tremendous majority, because his policies were correct. He fell, despite popular approval of his policies, because he "breached the faith" by breaking laws he had sworn to uphold.

For Theodore White the fall of Richard Nixon must have been a searing event. It threatened the whole conception of American politics that underlay his books on the making of Presidents since 1960. Each of those books proceeds on the grand assumption that the making of Presidents is the leading act of the democratic drama. The power wielded by modern Presidents is fateful, not just for Americans, but for every living human being. It is therefore crucial that the electoral process produce the correct result, that it put the right man in the White House.

And so it had, by White's reckoning, in every test since 1960. Each of his four quadriennial volumes ends triumphantly. The first one closes with the memorable image of Kennedy's wise gaze as he assumes the awesome powers of the Presidency, transfigured from tough, young politician into world statesman. The most recent volume, on Nixon's reelection, concludes with the interview in March, 1973, in which the President displays a masterful understanding of global politics and world history.

The problem is that the interview with Nixon occur-

red on the very day John Dean told him "there was a cancerous growth around the President" (as Nixon put it to his dictabelt that evening). For White, when he discovered it, this coincidence must have been terribly upsetting. His stock in trade had been his ability to penetrate the counsels of power and interpret their meaning for the general public, but this time he had obviously been deceived and manipulated. His credibility as a reporter was in peril—but far more than that. As he learned the extent of Nixon's corruption, his whole approach to American politics was also threatened.

The extent of the danger to White is revealed in the passages of his new book that set forth his reconciliation of majestic theory and awkward fact. It all goes back, he writes, to the "contradiction" frozen into the Constitution by "the romantic politics of the young revolutionaries who...forged the first republic since Rome."

At first, says White, the founders tried to govern without a strong executive. But soon their currency collapsed, their commerce stuttered, Indians raided their settlements, "dreams faded." Experience taught the need for strong leadership, and so they provided in their new Constitution for a powerful, elected executive, a strong President to bring them together "for one national purpose."

But they did not want to revert to tyranny, and so, "in what would today be called a 'deal,'" they tacked on ten amendments, the Bill of Rights, thus making the President responsible not only for the common defense and domestic tranquillity but for the liberties of the people as well. This "contradiction," argues White, has plagued all Presidents, and many (Lincoln, FDR) have been forced to violate the law in the name of "national security."

Nixon's transgressions, though, were greater, more systematic and long-lasting, than the precedents. Beginning in 1970, "under the provocation of street violence," Nixon approved the Huston memo, and although he later rescinded this approval, his assistants took the clue. In embarking on this course of repression, "neither he nor they" recognized that they were violating the nation's basic faith, "that we are bound together in the pursuit of happiness by common belief in personal liberty and equality before the law." In breaching this faith Nixon "had been guilty, in religious terms, of an Act of Heresy, or truly dangerous thought."

White's readiness to interpret Nixon's fall in religious terms is as annoying to most intellectuals as it is agreeable to the general public. (Thus, his book tops the best-seller list, but is excoriated in the *New York Review of Books*.) He is correct in sensing the need to place these events in a religious framework. The nation hungers for a renewal of its civil religion. It

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desperately wants to interpret its predicament in the light of its traditional faith.

But White is not the man for this season. His new book reveals how profoundly he misunderstands the American political tradition. It is simply fantastic to argue that the Constitution of 1787 represents a "deal" between executive power and the Bill of Rights. Lately there has been a tendency to glorify Presidents as the embodiment of the nation. White has been a major contributor, by his earlier books, to this pernicious habit. But the glorification of the Presidency is itself the fundamental heresy, the truly dangerous thought, from the standpoint of the American tradition of balanced power and government by law.

The real question raised by Nixon's transgressions, which White evades, is how we came to choose him in the first place, and why we were so beguiled by his invocations, in his own defense, of executive privilege, national security, and the Office of the Presidency. That is the question to which Jonathan Schell addresses his study of "The Nixon Years: The Time of Illusion," serialized in six issues (June 2-July 7, 1975) of *The New Yorker*.

Schell's analysis concentrates on the early years of Nixon's Presidency. His presentation is based on the contention that "a systemic crisis" had been building in the American political system for several years when Nixon assumed office and that Nixon's troubles in 1973 and 1974 were the culmination of this crisis. (Did the crisis end with Nixon's resignation? Schell is unclear on this point. At first he contends that it is "unmistakably over," but in the end he says that it was rooted in the nuclear dilemma, which is "lastingly ours.")

Like White, Schell speaks of the "faith" on which our system is built. His definition is simpler and less pretentious than White's: that "only in an atmosphere of freedom can the responsibilities [of government] be met." In the context of the nuclear dilemma this formula drives analysis to the depths of our predicament.

During the Nixon years, writes Schell, we lived in a realm of illusion. We were told that the war was ending, but the devastation in Indochina escalated. We heard calls for law and order while lawlessness was rampant in federal agencies. The new federalism, with its call for local control over federal programs, was accompanied by an unprecedented gathering of power into the White House.

Despite these paradoxes the mainstream of American politics showed no dissatisfaction with Richard Nixon in January, 1973. The popular mood was one almost of embarrassment about earlier doubts and harshness toward him. In trying to anticipate his actions in office, his earlier behavior was set aside. Prediction was given up; so was control. When the Senate failed to override a Nixon veto early in 1973, Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield commented,

without rancor, that Nixon was "in the driver's seat."

Why this response? How had Richard Nixon quieted our fears, lulled our anxieties, caused us to lower our guard? For Schell the answer is that the President's performance satisfied our deepest longings.

The conditioning fact of life since 1950 had been The Bomb. Mankind had taken into its own hands the power to invoke Armageddon. Now human politicians, the leaders of nations, had the power to dash nations to pieces, like a potter's vessel.

For three decades, and especially since the late 1950's, American intellectuals and political leaders had sought a way to conduct "foreign affairs" in the presence of this awful fact. During the 1950's the doctrine of massive retaliation was the official American position. But with the election of John Kennedy in 1960 the idea of deterrence through limited war was substituted.

Developed by Henry Kissinger and Maxwell Taylor, among others, the new doctrine was based on the notion that no nation could use nuclear weapons on another nation without destroying itself. Therefore, their use could only be threatened. Yet the threats, to be effective, had to be credible. They could be credible only if they were made by men who appeared unpredictable and capable of great cruelty. These qualities might be convincingly displayed in limited wars, aimed at deterring the enemy from nibbling away at weak spots in the other's sphere of influence.

This doctrine led to the catastrophic involvement in Vietnam, where the dynamics of an Asian civil war refused to conform to the need to maintain credibility. Presidents Johnson and Nixon were persuaded by their doctrine that they dared not back away from the commitment gradually undertaken in Vietnam. Nor could they candidly avow the cost of sustaining that commitment. So they lied—about what they were doing in Indochina, about what it was costing, and about what could be achieved in Vietnam by these tremendous sacrifices.

Gradually the people sickened of the war and its terrible costs and longed to be rid of it. But there was no coherent body of thought to substitute for the one that seemed to compel the commitment to Vietnam. Very few serious people believed it was possible for the United States and the Soviet Union really to trust one another. Many voices urged that we leave Vietnam, but they were vague and unconvincing about where, if anywhere, we should take our stand. When Nixon promised that we could have "peace with honor" in Vietnam and improving relations with the great Communist nations, based on respect born of fear, it seemed like a realistic arrangement, and he seemed mean and shrewd enough to pull it off.

But the moral cost was appalling. It required that Cambodia, a tiny nation striving pathetically to remain neutral, be dashed to pieces and that North Vietnam be subjected to a spectacular siege of bombing, apparently as an example of what we would do if the "peace" of January, 1973, were threatened in the

future.

The rationale behind these brutal acts was never candidly explained. They were undertaken in secrecy and duplicity. Schell describes the destruction of Cambodia as the first decisive act of the new Nixon Administration of 1969. When it was reported in the *Times*, a campaign of surveillance was undertaken to stop the leaks. The tone was set for the six Nixon years.

Inevitably the corruption of ideals spread from foreign affairs to domestic. Power was gathered to the White House. The press, Congress, the courts, grand juries—all were flagrantly manipulated in order to maintain support for a domestic policy that was the stepchild of this Administration.

The trouble with Schell's emphasis on the moral dilemma imposed by nuclear power is that it tends to dissolve moral responsibility. If Nixon's behavior is attributed to our new, apocalyptic powers, then he is not vicious, and we are not weak, but both are pathetic, or perhaps even tragic. What he did may have been brutal. It may have spread devastation in parts of the globe, corrupted political life in this country, and finally destroyed the hero himself. But it could not be avoided. We were all, including Nixon, players in a cosmic drama, caught up by historical forces that drove us beyond traditional morality. Nixon grappled with these perplexities as best he could, and he achieved the highest purpose of a political leader: security and prosperity for the people he led—at least until he was driven from office by politicians whose experience with the nuclear dilemma was superficial compared with his own.

Schell explicitly disavows the foregoing argument. He refuses to excuse Nixon's behavior by reference to the imperatives of life in the nuclear age. He notes that alternative policies were offered; during the Kennedy and Johnson years by Fulbright and Kennan, among others, and in the Nixon years by Walter Hickel(!). In addition, he notes that millions of ordinary citizens demanded that the war in Indochina be brought to an end.

But in the next breath he admits that the doctrine of deterrence by credibility was the nation's "first sustained, intellectually coherent attempt to incorporate the implications of nuclear weaponry into national policy." Neither Hickel nor "millions of ordinary citizens" were capable of developing an alternative basis for relating to other nations in the nuclear age. In the absence of such a theory Nixon's improvisations, within the context of the Kissinger-Taylor strategy, seem almost inevitable.

In 1952, at the dawn of the nuclear age, Reinhold Niebuhr wrote a prophetic book entitled *The Irony of American History*. Niebuhr identified two strands of our tradition: out front, a bright self-confidence, seeing America as an innocent land, where a strong yeomanry, hobbled no longer by Euro-

pean traditions, was free to pursue happiness in self-governing communities; behind this naive facade, a skeptical realism, determined to foil the corrupting touch of human ambition by balancing power in social and political arrangements.

In our popular culture the strain of innocent self-assertion usually dominated. But our political institutions were built by Calvinists, which meant that public policy was determined by tests of strength between balanced forces, producing a kind of rough justice that transcended the dreams and schemes of any single group. In foreign relations, over most of our history, the dangers inherent in our chauvinistic sentiments were counteracted by an abhorrence of military establishments, geographical isolation, and the strength of other nations.

Niebuhr saw that nuclear weapons radically altered the circumstances of our foreign policy. The United States now commanded unprecedented and unmatched destructive power. But Niebuhr warned that military might did not confer the wisdom necessary to dominate the affairs of other nations. If we tried to assert hegemony over the whole world, we would lose our own soul.

The situation called for moral restraint, a quality not prominent in our political culture. Niebuhr suggested that the resources for restraint lay in an appreciation of the ironic element in history. Frustration and catastrophe can often be traced to the ironic tendency of virtue to be transformed, through excess, into its opposite.

Niebuhr argued that the ironic pattern was particularly evident in American history. Now nuclear power made the stakes colossal. Unless we came to appreciate the limits of our ability to rule other nations, our efforts, however idealistically undertaken, would end in catastrophe.

Looking back, it seems fair to conclude that American policy-makers in the two decades following World War II had a rather lively sense of the dangers of trusting in our own innocence. The temptation to throw off restraint was ever present, as in MacArthur's restlessness in Korea, Dulles's anticommunism, and parts of Kennedy's Inaugural Address. But the controlling actions were typified by Truman's acceptance of a Korean stalemate, Eisenhower's restraint at Suez and in the Hungarian revolt, and Kennedy's willingness to accept humiliation at the Bay of Pigs.

In the late 1950's Soviet mastery of nuclear technology added a new element. At first it seemed a blessing that American power would be confronted by an opposite number. Niebuhr was among those who welcomed the new "balance of terror." Under the nuclear umbrella most observers hoped that a stable balance might be achieved among nations, with the United States and the Soviet Union acting as joint guarantors of boundaries and mutual respect.

But these reassuring prospects proved illusory. The third decade after Hiroshima produced new outbreaks

of the sophisticated barbarity that has characterized this appalling century.

What happened was that the superpowers agreed to hold each other in terror, and the rest of the world in contempt. We began to play the Soviet's game, to match their arrogance. Their culture, unlike our own, was dominated by a single strand: self-righteous Marxism, made cruel by Russian sadism, untempered by Russian fatalism and idealism. Confronted by such an adversary, our own tendency to self-righteousness gained dominance. Tacitly we agreed to divide up other nations—"satellites"—into spheres of influence, and tested one another's resolve at the margins, applying the latest techniques of warfare and population control. American policy came to be made by men (Bundy, Rostow, McNamara and Rusk; Kissinger, Laird, and Rogers) whose sense of irony, if they had one at all, deferred to the pretentious heroics of the Presidents under whom they served.

The corruption and distortion of values produced by this international situation inevitably spread inward. In a classical illustration of Niebuhrian irony, the United States, in assuming the burden of governing the free world, lost the capacity to govern itself. The new international relations compelled us to accept a degree of Presidential discretion wholly alien to our constitutional system. Most Americans accepted the claim that control over our nuclear arsenal had to reside in a single person. It was easy for our adversary, a totalitarian dictatorship, to adapt to these rules. Reluctantly, but inexorably, we too became accustomed to autocracy and accepted Presidential behavior, in the interest of "national security,"

that would have been unthinkable in even our strongest Presidents before Johnson. Suddenly we were growing used to tyranny.

It is sometimes complained that James Madison uses the term "tyranny" in *The Federalist* without ever defining it. Actually Madison does define it, as "the accumulation of all powers...in the same hands." It may be argued that such a gathering of power need not always be tyrannical, but Madison would contend that when power is not "separated" and balanced, it will eventually be abused and exercised in a tyrannical fashion. Nixon's performance, beginning benignly with the breakthrough to China and the imposition of economic controls, and ending in the gross abuses listed in the impeachment resolution, seems a perfect illustration of this teaching.

It will not be the last, if we fail to heed the warnings of the founders. Before the crisis—which reached a climax with Nixon's resignation and the debacle in Vietnam—can truly be resolved, we must rebuild our institutions, deliberately or by adaptation, in accordance with Calvinistic principles, without rendering them incapable of meeting the dangers posed by nations whose simplistic, arrogant ideologies impose no such restraints.

More is involved than choosing Presidents who will respect the Bill of Rights. We must find ways to hold our Presidents accountable to other political forces between elections. Unless and until we find ways to do this, "the systemic crisis" that became manifest in the middle 1960's will not end. In the meantime it would help if we recovered an instinctive preference for political leaders who were aware of the ironic tendency in all human striving.

## The Transfiguration of Politics: The Presence and Power of Jesus of Nazareth in and over Human Affairs

by Paul Lehmann

(Harper and Row; 366 pp.; \$12.95)

Stanley Hauerwas

The great Swiss theologian once remarked that Christian witness should be made with the Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other. Not a bad idea. But there is a radical variant of Barthianism that, as one wit noted, ends up standing on the Bible with a newspaper in one hand and a gun in the other. That variant, sad to say, is

all too evident in this latest work by Professor Paul Lehmann of Union Theological Seminary in Richmond, Virginia.

"To the weakness of power Jesus juxtaposes the power of weakness." "Revolution is the lifestyle of truth." "The biblical meaning of politics is the human meaning of politics and the

human meaning of politics is the biblical meaning of politics." The reputation of the author and the "in" subject of the book make it likely these slogans will gain a degree of currency. They join rejuvenated old standbys like "current revolutionary experience signals the righteousness of God in action, freeing human beings for being human."

However, slogans do not an intelligible position make. Lehmann's inability to resist such formulas when arguments are required makes this a potentially dangerous book. Dangerous, that is, if anyone paid attention to theological works on politics. Most people have learned better. Lehmann's book provides additional evidence that, apart from a few isolated souls, the theological community has not, since Reinhold Niebuhr, been able to sustain