

OUR GANG

by Philip Roth

Random House, 200 pp., \$5.95

Reviewed by Arthur Cooper

■ Philip Roth is a skilled practitioner of literary acupuncture. Jewish mothers, Midwestern emasculators, the *nouveau riche*—he has pierced them all with his sharp-edged fiction. The target of Roth's latest shaft is no one less than President Richard Milhous Nixon himself and the curious coterie that surrounds him. As darkly imagined by Roth, Nixon emerges as Trick E. (Tricky) Dixon, and his supporting cast includes First Lady Pitter, Vice President What's-his-name, Attorney General Malicious, Defense Secretary Lard, Mr. Heehaw of the FBI, Mayor John Lancelot of New York City, former President Lyin' B. Johnson, the murdered brothers John F. and Robert F. Charisma, and Jacqueline Charisma Colossus.

Roth's complaint with Nixon is neatly defined in a prefatory quotation taken from George Orwell: "Political language . . . is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind." Emile de Antonio, who made the mildly satirical anti-Nixon documentary *Millhouse*, said much the same thing in a recent interview: "[Nixon] is like a Homeric figure in the Cave of the Winds—all he's dealing with is *air*." Roth's rage surges through the book like a Potomac of acid.

He begins his vitriolic assault by quoting from an actual speech in which Nixon deplored abortions and declared his belief in the sanctity of human life, "including the life of the yet unborn." A Rothian leap of imagination soon has Tricky Dixon in a nasty confrontation with the Boy Scouts, who regard his pronouncement on the unborn as a blanket endorsement for fornication. Dixon, not one to have sown his Quaker oats, is appalled. "Now it was one thing when those Vietnam soreheads came down here to the Capitol to turn their medals in," he splutters. "Everybody knew they were just a bunch of malcontents who had lost arms and legs and so on. . . . Of course they couldn't be objective about the war—half of them were in wheelchairs because of it. But what we have now isn't just a mob of ingrates—these are *the Boy Scouts!*"

Having already survived Six Hundred Crises, Tricky coolly handles this one by a) ordering the army to disperse the demonstrators—an operation in which three Boy Scouts are killed; b) accusing former baseball star Curt

Flood of corrupting the Scouts and inciting the riot, and c) launching a nuclear attack against the "pro-pornography" government of Denmark for harboring Flood. But before the President can turn these bold actions into political gains he is damply assassinated—found naked "bent into the fetal position, inside a large transparent baggie filled with a clear fluid presumed to be water, and tied shut at the top." The end of Tricky Dixon? Hardly.

A writer with Roth's comic gifts can't but produce some outrageously hilarious moments. I particularly enjoyed the President's "skull session" with his aides in the "blastproof underground locker room." And there is a wonderful swipe at television pundit Erect Severehead ("Good evening. . . . A hushed hush pervades the corridors of power. Great men whisper whispers while a stunned capital awaits"). But Roth is only partly successful for, while his aim is true, his satire isn't Swift. Occasionally his anger gets the best of him and his humor sours. In fact, Nixon's rough treatment at Roth's hands may very well invite more sympathy for him than anything since the Checkers speech.

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