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The real Nixon —as seen by a Freudian

By Mildred Hamilton

David Abrahamsen, the psychiatrist who has picked Nixon's psyche clean, makes no apologies for his actions.

Nor would the doctor, who has analyzed the former president as both a psychopathic and a paranoid personality, be abashed to meet Nixon face to face.

"I would love to have a chance to talk with him. I tried for years to get an interview," said the psychoanalyst and authority on criminal behavior. When he couldn't arrange a personal meeting, he put Nixon on a mental couch, applied "orthodox Freudian analysis methods" to him and put the results in a book.

"Nixon vs. Nixon: An Emotional Tragedy," just published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux, has brought varied reaction. "A truly remarkable achievement," says Columbia University psychiatrist Phillip Polatin. "Outrageous, cheap and disgusting," says Harvard psychiatrist Robert Coles.

But David Frost was so impressed by Abrahamsen's understanding of the political phenomenon that he sent members of his staff to spend three long sessions with the psychiatrist to "get help in how to approach Nixon for the television interviews. Frost said, 'You are the key to comprehending the Nixon personality.'"

The first of the four scheduled May programs will be aired Wednesday. "I will be an attentive viewer," Abrahamsen promised during his San Francisco visit to defend his 10th and most-talked-about book.

The soft-voiced 73-year-old looks more like an indulgent grandfather, which he is five times over, than a literary lyncher, which he has been called.

He smiled and shrugged, "I take the attacks with a grain of salt. He was a fantastic case in American politics. Why shouldn't I write about him so the psychiatric interpretation could help the American public learn?"

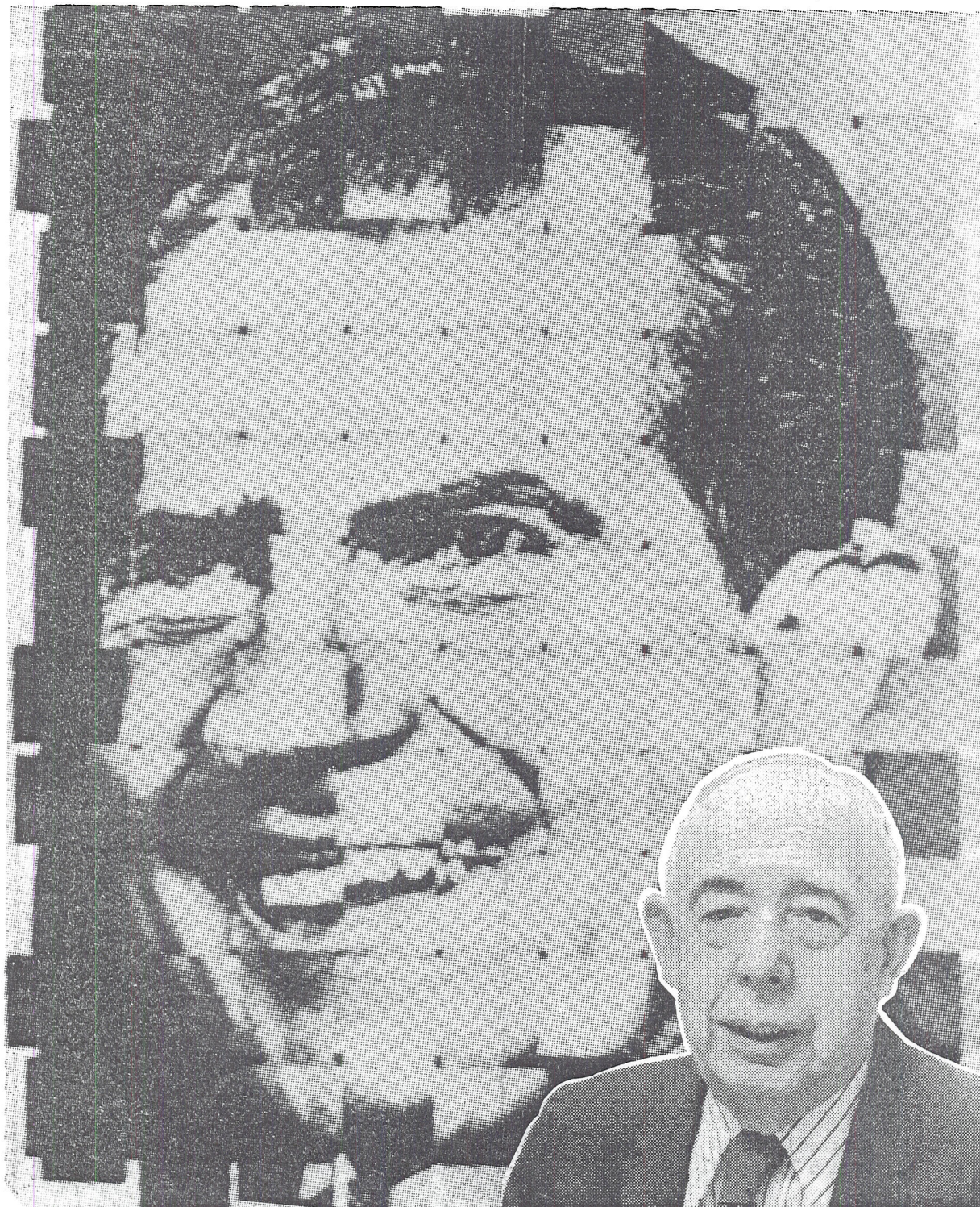
"It was most difficult to write," said the author of "The Murdering Mind," "The Psychology of Crime" and "The Mind and Death of a Genius." "But this is my motto: As easy as it is to condemn, as difficult it is to understand."

Abrahamsen, who still speaks with a heavy accent, fled his native Norway during the Nazi occupation. He was on the Menninger Clinic staff before beginning his practice in New York in 1943. The political, as well as the criminal, mind has always intrigued him.

"I began to follow Nixon in his first campaign in 1946 when he used the 'big lie' to trick voters into believing Rep. Jerry Voorhis was a Communist. I studied his early hostility and aggression, his hysteria in the 'Checkers' speech over his slush fund. I followed him as a vice president, his political defeats, and I read everything written about him, including his own 'Six Crises.' My publisher wanted me to write about him in 1971 but I felt I didn't know enough."

The doctor also had a busy practice, other writing and demands for testimony as an expert in mass murder and plane hijacking trials. But he continued what he called his psychodetection to locate and talk with people from all ages of Nixon's life.

"If he had been my patient, I could not have written about him without his permission. But in this psychobiography I have tried to be fair to him and to



Author David Abrahamsen in front of his book's jacket design

the nation. I think he now needs psychiatric help but I doubt that he will accept it. If he could have gotten it in time—in college or early in his law career—his emotional tragedy might have been avoided.”

Abrahamsen found that Nixon's father was a failure, that his grandfather was a failure, and “unconsciously Nixon sought failure.” The psychoanalyst, who questioned many relatives and friends from the former president's childhood, called the family home “joyless, as joyless as he himself was when he created his own home in the White House.

“As we follow Nixon's life we will find that behind all his actions as a child, and later as an adult, was a person who had been cheated out of love . . . The real poverty of his early life was not economic; it was emotional.”

His mother's “best helper,” he drew the blinds tight so no one could see him, and his most outstanding distinction was as a potato masher. As a 10-year-old, in a fantasy, he wrote to his mother and signed the letter, “Your good dog, Richard,” an indication of emotional instability to the doctor.

Nixon's lack of personal warmth runs through the psychobiography. Abrahamsen quoted Bay Area novelist Jessamyn West, a Nixon cousin, as saying, “He wasn't a little boy that you wanted to pick up and hug.”

The doctor finds a parallel to a college dean's office break-in and Watergate. “Nixon learned if one is clever and daring enough, the rules can be broken without being discovered.” The psychiatrist emphasizes that Nixon's behavior in his first law case caused the judge

to express "serious doubts whether you have the ethical qualifications to practice law in the state of California" and to consider seeking disbarment.

The marriage to Pat, also described as a perfectionist and a fighter, the "loner" years in the Navy, the tendency to see all issues in terms of adversaries, are examined by the psychoanalyst. "One might say," Abrahamsen said of the relentless drive against the Communists and Alger Hiss, "that in his efforts to destroy Hiss, he was also trying to destroy the secret enemy within himself."

Twenty-five years later Nixon "unconsciously carried on the same crusade against Daniel Ellsberg. It was also a fight to preserve his own secrets. It was Nixon against Nixon."

The doctor believes Nixon's inner conflict was the "well-spring of his success as a politician as well as the pain and the depression he felt when he left the

Author of 'psychobiography' analyzes Nixon as a paranoid personality

presidency. Unaware of the enemies in his own mind, he projected them onto others. He withdrew into himself to live there with his loneliness, his hypersensitivity, his narcissism, his suspicion, his secrecy. His childhood fears and anger never left him."

Looking at his treatment of the former president, Abrahamsen said, "My purpose was not to blast Nixon. I have sympathy for the magnitude of his personal problems, admiration for his tenacity. I deplore his duplicity and I share the pain of his ultimate downfall and the disillusionment of his presidency."

Questioned about his version of the reported drinking in the last days in the White House, Abrahamsen said, "I have sympathy for his wife. I omitted a lot I learned. If they drank, can they be blamed?"

After his psychobiography of Nixon, how does Abrahamsen feel about psychiatric examinations for all presidential candidates? His brown eyes brightened. "No, I am opposed to that, but one certainly should go thoroughly into the history of anyone who wants to be president, from his childhood on."

Of the talk that Julie Nixon Eisenhower has political ambitions, Abrahamsen said, "She is very much like her father. The question is—what has she learned from her father's experiences?"

Now that his Nixon watch has ended, as far as any analytic writing is concerned, has the doctor taken a professional look at President Carter?

"Indeed. He now seems more symbol than substance in many ways. I believe he has to be watched. I shall not say any more." At the moment, that is.
