

Flying the Double Standard

Reviewed by
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Book World

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The true Nixon haters, the ones who were against Richard Milhous Nixon before the rest of the country heard about him, are inevitably Californians who remember the congressional campaign against Jerry Voorhis and the senatorial campaign against Helen Gahagan Douglas.

Frank Mankiewicz is a charter member of this hate-Nixon fraternity. His ground of being is the 1950 election, when Mr. Nixon savaged Mrs. Douglas and when a UCLA student named Mankiewicz went down to glorious defeat as a Democratic state assembly candidate running against a Republican incumbent best known for his sponsorship of a notorious teachers' loyalty oath.

Defeat did not diminish him. Looking back on his own hopeless campaign, Mankiewicz used to quip that only two people had shown up at one of his fundraisers. More than two decades later he still had enough sense of humor left to reply to a Republican charge that George McGovern had technically violated

PERFECTLY CLEAR: Nixon from Whittier to Watergate. By Frank Mankiewicz.
(Quadrangle, 239 pp. \$8.95)



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Frank Mankiewicz.

the campaign spending law by saying, "It's like a man being arrested for bank rob-

bery with the money still on him telling the police about a jaywalker."

Unfortunately, this wit and its accompanying sense of proportion is absent from "Perfectly Clear." True to the Puritan spirit of the McGovern campaign and to his own fundamentalist hatred of Mr. Nixon, Mankiewicz has confused seriousness of purpose with taking one's self too seriously. The result, compounded by an obvious haste to bring this book to market, is a thin and frequently shrill tract that assumes into evidence almost everything that the Watergate special prosecutor and the Senate Watergate Committee is trying to prove and much besides.

Like most Watergate books, "Perfectly Clear" has also been hopelessly outdistanced by events that have occurred since publication. Spiro Agnew's downfall and Rose Mary Woods' acrobatic tale of the tapes are far more gripping than any of the Mankiewicz conjectures. And the case for impeachment which Mankiewicz makes at the end of his book must rest on stronger ground than assertions that the President's "chief of staff held office illegally for three months" or assumptions that every horror of the administration was directly ordered by Mr. Nixon.

What is most valuable in "Perfectly Clear" is the material of the past that is relatively impervious to new

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disclosures. Mankiewicz is on his own ground in California. Aided by interviews with Voorhis and Mrs. Douglas, Mankiewicz draws a perfectly clear picture of the sleazy, unethical campaigns conducted by the young Nixon in 1946 and 1950.

Voorhis was a mild-mannered liberal who was steadfastly opposed by the Communists. Mr. Nixon with Murray Chotiner's guidance, portrayed him as an ally of the Communists. Ironically, as Mankiewicz observes, Mr. Nixon had far more help from the Communists than Voorhis ever did. When the young congressman ran for reelection in 1948, which turned out to be a bad Republican year in California, he sought to take advantage of the state's since-discarded crossfiling law and win both party primaries. Mr. Nixon succeeded but only because the Communist-leaning Independent Progressive Party put up a candidate and siphoned off a sufficient number of Democratic votes. Mankiewicz also provides a readable, though unoriginal, account of the 1950 campaign when Mr. Nixon used Rep. Vito Marcantonio's (the only member of The American Labor Party then in

Congress) Communist-line voting record to smear Mrs. Douglas in the U.S. Senate race. The California liberals of that day never seemed to realize that Mrs. Douglas helped destroy herself by accepting Nixon's own premises, and they still don't. Mankiewicz, for instance, approvingly quotes such Douglas leaflets as, "YOU pick the congressman the Kremlin loves."

Once beyond the California chapter, the book loses its sense of purpose. Mankiewicz quotes an interesting but irrelevant letter from Albert Speer to make an unconvincing analogy that Mr. Nixon represents a Nazi-like American principle of leadership. Indeed, Mankiewicz reaches back into history and finds that the young, opportunistic Mr. Nixon and his gang used California as "a political laboratory—as the Germans had made Spain a military laboratory." It is a sadder truth that Mr. Nixon's red-baiting tactics were par for the California political course in the late 1940's.

One entire chapter of the book is devoted to a long speech that Mankiewicz imagines Mr. Nixon might give if he "told the truth."

This truthful Nixon, if

Mankiewicz were his speechwriter, would say, "I want to tell you tonight how I have managed, over great obstacles, to reduce my taxes in two ways." The passage concludes with Mr. Nixon asserting: "And the property tax hits only the substantial decent American who owns property, the very person who can help most by investing his capital to make this a stronger and more secure land."

It does not seem to have occurred to Mankiewicz that many, if not most, of Mr. Nixon's problems arise precisely from his inability to think of himself in this way. To the California haters of Nixon, he was always the conscious, Machiavellian liar who knew the truth and spoke the contrary. Events of Mr. Nixon's presidency have revealed him to be insecure, driven and far too morally insensitive to conceive of himself in these terms. Mr. Nixon does not, as he informed us to our embarrassment, think of himself as a crook. Indeed, he does not seem to know the difference between right and wrong.

This lack of any attempt at insight into Mr. Nixon's character undermines "Perfectly Clear," which gives

us Mr. Nixon not as man but as monster. Even more, the book reveals a persistent double standard that does Mankiewicz no credit. McGovern's "pranks" against John Lindsay are great fun, Dick Tuck is glorified (with no mention of his paste-and-scissors campaign against a decent Democratic state senator) and the 1964 campaign between Lyndon Johnson and Barry Goldwater is dismissed as a relatively straightforward affair except for one anti-Johnson spying incident and the pro-Goldwater film "Choice" which Mankiewicz says "intercut patriotic and war scenes with shots of pornography displays . . . and even one memorable shot of a beer can sailing out of a speeding limousine." He neglects to mention the Democratic television spot in which a little girl pulls

petals out of daisies before disappearing in a nuclear blast presumably induced by Goldwater.

It is precisely this sort of double-standard perception which Nixon apologists have tried to use to their own advantage in attempting to convince the American people that the Watergate horrors are really politics as usual. To demonstrate that the politics of Mr. Nixon are different, as they are, one must do something other than look into a mirror image of the White House where all the world is divided into friends and enemies. "Perfectly Clear" is caught by this mirror image, and Mankiewicz is content to portray Mr. Nixon as Public Enemy No. 1. The American people need more useful distinctions. We must do more with Mr. Nixon than simply returning the contempt he has shown for all of us.