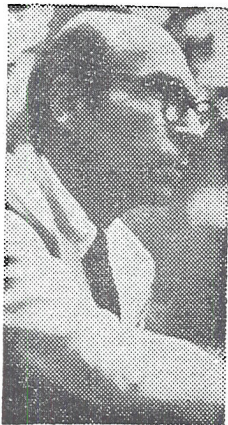


# President Nixon's Hang-Ups

By CHRISTOPHER LEHMANN-HAUPT

**IN SEARCH OF NIXON.** A psychohistorical Inquiry. By Bruce Mazlish. 187 pages, Illustrated. Basic Books. \$6.95.

I don't know; I suppose belief in the study of psychohistory is like faith in a personal God. You either have it or you don't, and no amount of ontological, teleological or a priori proofs will alter your basic disposition. So it will probably depend entirely on your basic disposition how you react to "In Search of Nixon: A Psychohistorical Inquiry" By Bruce Mazlish—a fascinating attempt to place the President on the couch (strictly for descriptive, not for prescriptive, purposes, mind you) by an M.I.T. history professor trained in psychoanalysis, and a practitioner of psychohistory, which he himself defines as "a fusion of psychoanalysis and history (not a mere application of one to the other) in which both disciplines modify the other."



Bruce Mazlish

To those who believe in the universality of the Oedipus conflict among males, for instance, or in the ineluctability of the death wish in all human beings, Professor Mazlish's approach to Mr. Nixon will seem plausible. And all his conclusions, too: Which are that "Nixon is a man torn between his mother's dislike of warfare and his father's sharp competitiveness: thus, he is extremely ambivalent about his aggressive impulses and tends to deal with them by projection onto others. He is a man haunted by his father's 'failure' and driven to avoid that failure for himself and to redeem it for his parent. He compensates for lack of native abilities, where this is the case, by enormous hard work and persistence. He is racked by indecision and by the question of his own courage, especially in a crisis. He has had a serious problem with death wishes and anxiety in relation to his brothers, Eisenhower and himself. He is an 'actor' in the theatrical sense and releases himself verbally in debates. He is a fundamentalist in religion, with a passive acceptance of authority. He projects unacceptable impulses onto others. He identifies his personal interest with the national interest. He exalts strength and fears passivity. And so on and on."

## His Need to Appear Decisive

Yes, indeed, if there are embedded in Mr. Nixon's personality deep passive tendencies and longings to be dependent (both of which he fears), this might indeed explain his contempt for losers and student-protester "bums," his distrust of big Government bureaucracy and his need always to appear strong and decisive. And yes, if he does in fact identify himself with the national interest to the extent that Professor Mazlish claims, it would account at least in part for the extraordinary proliferation of the pronoun "I" in the opening

of his 1970 speech on Cambodia, as well as for his concern that the United States not appear "like a pitiful helpless giant" in its dispatch of the war in Vietnam.

On the other hand, to those with any doubts about the psychohistorical approach, Professor Mazlish will not seem so skillful in his dissection of Mr. Nixon's psyche. To some people it will seem strange that the professor has psychohistoricalized a man he has never interviewed. To the skeptical it will seem an extremely tenuous step from Professor Mazlish's speculation that "the . . . effect of his brothers' deaths would be to arouse in [Nixon] a threat and fear of his own death" to his hypothesis that "it may be that Nixon's need for 'crisis' is partly motivated by the need to confront his death fears, repeatedly and constantly."

To doubters, Mr. Nixon's "overreaction" to the rejections of Judges Haynsworth and Carswell may not need to be explained as "projection" of "one's own aggressive and nasty impulses" on to "others"; from the evidence that Professor Mazlish offers, one could conclude just as easily that when Mr. Nixon announced in bitter tones that he wasn't going to subject any more Southerners to "malicious character assassination," he was simply trying to appease his Southern constituents.

## Item to Give Pause

And as far as the significance that Professor Mazlish reads into the fact that after the 1970 predawn chat with antiwar students at the Lincoln Memorial, Mr. Nixon ate "corned beef hash with an egg on it" for the first time in five years ("After the catharsis, an acceptable short regression in orality!")—such an insight is enough to give pause to even true believers in psychohistory.

I happen to be one of those true believers, so I read "In Search of Nixon" as sympathetically as I could force myself to do. And I found myself rooting for Professor Mazlish, particularly hard when in his concluding, and most compelling, chapter, on "The Psychohistorical Approach," he tries to defend his work against its potential detractors by explaining the uses and limitations of psychohistory.

Still, one wonders about this book: If psychohistory is a fusion of two disciplines, why is the historical dimension scanted here? Why does Professor Mazlish focus mainly on the figure of Mr. Nixon and not on the historical forces that have produced so many others like him? If Professor Mazlish professes to admire so much about Mr. Nixon, why does he inject so many subtly hostile innuendoes? And if the real value of psychohistory is to shed light on shadowy figures from the historical past (like Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther), why bother at all to deal with Mr. Nixon, especially since future memoirs and biographies promise to illuminate so much more?

Certainly, there is something intriguing about seeing the President's psyche so undressed, and certainly there is satisfaction in it for anyone who feels hostile to the President. But does this really serve the high purpose that Professor Mazlish claims it does? In the end, I rather doubt it.