

## The Making of the President

# Nixon: Wisdom In Melancholy

*Theodore White is the distinguished journalist whose books describing presidential campaigns have become a tradition. The latest in the series, "The Making of the President—1972," is about to be published. The following is the last of a number of exclusive excerpts from the awaited volume.*

*By Theodore H. White*

WHEN I came home 20 years ago, after many years abroad, to write of American politics, Richard Nixon was already a major figure of the national scene.

And all he stood for, as nearly as I could make out, I feared. I wrote of him in this style over the years of the '50s and then discovered, to my surprise, that the harsh edge of my reporting was softening.

I had the choice, as a reporter, of writing about him from afar — in which case, his rhetoric and public posture made him the most inviting target at which a liberal might wing his eloquence. Or I could pursue him, seek personal contact in order to measure the man I was writing about.

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This second choice, of course, carried with it an obligation to respect his privacy — and, even more, an obligation to try to understand. I chose the second course, and discovered that the unguarded private man was fascinating.

What was interesting about Richard Nixon was the education life had given him — an education as engrossing as the "Education of Henry Adams."

Richard Nixon was, to be sure, not a very trusting person. Life had made him that way. There hung over him the wary loneliness of a man always excluded from the company of those he admired; he guarded his hurts. He had been excluded all the way — from the football team at Whittier High School

as a boy, from the private upper floor of the White House even after he had become Vice President.

Life was always for him a bare-knuckled fight upward, at every level — and he made friends with difficulty. Most were flatterers in later life; he was a name and a property to be used; yet he hungered for loyalties.

But on the way the mind of the loner had been working, observant of himself as of others. Thus, as I came to know him, to observe his mind changing, my respect began.

There was in his private talk a stubborn candor of self-recognition; in his thinking was a muscular quality of grappling with the facts as they were. The recognized pugnacity was there, that toughness of response, even cruelty, with which he could respond to toughness thrust at him. Above all, two qualities: a fatalism of outlook and a personal melancholy which added wisdom to his reflections.

Over the years, thus, I watched Richard Nixon change from the man I had denounced — from the cold warrior to the man who sought peace with China; from the red-baiter to the enemy of the John Birch Society; from the unfeeling opponent of every social program in House and Senate to the advocate of a guaranteed annual income, the first modern welfare proposal since Franklin Roosevelt's Social Security Act — and my respect grew.

I was a liberal. He was a conservative. Our mind-sets ran differently. I had come back to the United States in the early '50s at a moment when poetry passed briefly through American politics — first Adlai Stevenson, then John F. Kennedy gave a music to public affairs. There was no poetry in Richard Nixon.

The mind, then, was what first intrigued me, both for its toughness and for its range. The range of Richard Nixon's mind was astonishing — it reached from the problems of Singapore to the exports of Japan, to the minutiae of Southern Cali-





**No privacy with a telephone around**

fornia politics, to the cost factors in political publicity, to the sequence of railway towns in Ohio — just which towns lay north or south of Lima, Ohio, for example, and what people made there. The mind embraced the ethnic pattern of America, personalities at the Pentagon, draft figures and the impact on colleges.

Nixon had the courage to face facts even when they did not fit together. In conversation, his mind could go, zip, from what appeared to be a covering banality to the most precise exposition of sustaining and contradictory facts.

I remember speaking to him on the telephone in 1969 just 15 minutes after the astronauts had landed for the first time on the moon, a moment of American drama, if there ever was one. He was exhilarated. He had been watching the Cronkite narration on television.

First came a football image. Those last 20 seconds before Armstrong and Aldrin landed, he said, were just like the last 20 seconds of a tight football game; and then shifting metaphor, he continued — it was like the explorers of Spain reaching the New World. People miss the whole thing about the Age of Exploration, he said; it wasn't what they brought back at first that counted, it was the lift it gave to man's spirit.

Then his mind locked into tight reasoning: we Americans were going to make the adventure in space a free-world enterprise; he wanted to bring other nations in; Kissinger was working on it—the British, the NATO allies, the Japanese to show that Asians were included in space, too. Eventually, the Russians — but that couldn't be done right away, for national security was involved, and Russian pride. But he was sure you could run an integrated multi-national adventure in space.

He had problems with the military, of course. But if the allies came into the space adventure, per-



**A study in the Executive Office Building**

haps they could be brought to bear 20 per cent of the expense of the space program.



His mind had all the facts at hand, had pre-sorted them into patterns—all this within 20 minutes of the time first men had walked on the moon to plant the American flag.

Talking to Nixon, either before or during his Presidency, left the visitor enlarged in his own re-patterning of facts. The mind of the President was not philosophical. Fatalistic, yes. But questioning, no. He was President, or candidate for President—and the President was the national symbol.

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Conversations with him, when I first came to know him, had the sound of a male Barbara Fritchie calling "Shoot, if you must, this old gray head, but spare your country's flag." Then it sank in that this was the philosophy of Richard Nixon; there was nothing spurious about it. His first duty was to protect the state of America—against all enemies, at home and abroad. This led to the next, the overriding thought in his mind. America needed peace—he would bring peace.

When George McGovern spoke of peace all through the campaign of 1972, one understood that the word "peace" meant, for McGovern, brotherhood between all peoples of the world. I have never heard Nixon use the word "brotherhood" privately; if he has used it publicly, it must have been with his fingers crossed behind his back.

For Nixon, peace was a need of the American people, to be won by hard, tough negotiations and deals with other hard, tough governments overseas who took the word "brotherhood" as skeptically as did he. Once peace was won, it was his conviction, the American people at home would be able to find their own way into the future, with a minimum of control from the government.

**By 1973 I had followed the evolution of his thinking through his Presidency, through his foreign policy, through his liquidation of the burden of**

**the draft on American young men, through his concept of environmental control, through his thrust for revenue-sharing, through his definitions of the communities and constituencies of American life.**

I had been appalled by the Watergate affair during the campaign, as was everyone; it was, I felt, a clinical indecency in politics which the President should have cauterized immediately, however loyal his lieutenants might have been.

I had accepted, finally, the concept of the President as steward of the state's interests abroad, one man expressing the will of the people, but ultimately responsible alone for defining and deciding who were their enemies and friends overseas. But I had not then imagined that in Nixon's mind this power of the state could be stretched to defining enemies and friends at home in America, too.

On balance, however, the record of Richard Nixon had earned from me a high respect which came to crest on Saturday afternoon of March 17, 1973, the last time I saw the President.

Four days later were to begin those revelations and charges which were to shatter his confidence in himself, the nation's confidence in him, and raise for everyone who writes of American history or politics those unavoidable questions: Would he go down in history as the President of Peace or the President of Watergate?

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My judgment, suspended at that date, would have cast Richard Nixon as one of the major Presidents of the 20th Century, in a rank just after Franklin Roosevelt, on a level with Truman, Wilson, Eisenhower, Kennedy.

At best, Nixon, however magnificent his management of American power abroad, is guilty of gross negligence in management of the power of the White House at home.

And at the worst?

**At the worst, which his enemies and friends alike debate at the moment, he would be found guilty of a specific crime, "misprision of justice."**

The crime alleged is both specific and peculiar, for the word "misprision" comes from the old French word "mesprendre," to make a mistake. The word came into English from the Norman kings, who required that all officials of the strange Anglo-Saxon country they conquered report crimes against the state to them. One commits misprision of justice when one fails to recognize felony or treason, or aids and abets in concealing or covering up such felony or treason from the courts of law.

The running question that pursues the President of the United States is whether or not he knew felony was being committed, and whether he made a mistake in not acting on such knowledge. Such a mistake in the President of the United States is unforgivable—and he would have to leave.

But to indict a President only on hearsay evidence or gossip is equally unforgivable.





A quiet moment along the San Clemente beach, shared by the President and Mrs. Nixon