

# White's Nixon

A Commentary

By Nicholas von Hoffman

gifted of angels who went sour. After mentioning detente and China with approval, White says: "(Nixon) got the young men out of the draft. He did a spectacular environment program, the best of any industrial nation in the world . . . you have to understand that this man did so much good in his years in office, and then you say to yourself, 'How could he be so stupid, so cheap, so mean . . . so ferocious, so cruel?' . . . I will do my best to understand, but there are certain things which are unforgivable."

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wicked than this fallen angel.

White is so angry because he takes it personally. Can you conceive of the most unregenerate anti-Nixon lefties saying, "What I hold against Richard Nixon is he almost shattered my confidence in our country's ability to run itself . . . I was disappointed in Johnson (but) disappointed, deceived and hurt by Richard Nixon."

Blurting something like that out transcends the embarrassment of looking like a jackass because one once wrote complimentary sentences about Nixon. This comes closer to a child's lashing out at being told Santa Claus is a guy on Macy's payroll. White has been doing his reporting of Presidents with the critical eye of a Peruvian monk freshly come to Rome to look on the face of his Pope:

"The people anoint and elect the President. The people express the will of God, (if) such there be. And thus, the President, whether he knows it or not, is a high priestly figure, he is a sacerdotal figure . . . Washington, Lincoln, Roosevelt were really ennobled by the office . . .

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Tom Snyder has made a large name for himself on television by interviewing the three ends of two-headed calves and other freaks of nature. From time to time, though, he deviates from Believe-It-or-Not Ripley-type guests and puts a noncuriosity on his NBC "Tomorrow" show.

The other night it was Theodore H. ("The Making of the President" series) White. The occasion was the publication of White's newest book on the unmaking of President Nixon; but for the audience it was also a chance to see how a successful, well

To White the men President Nixon chose to surround himself with are "real, swinish brutes" and "hustlers" rotten with "squirming ambition." This is the kind of language used by those who opposed Nixon when he was in office, but they would probably qualify it now. Yet here is White, a man in such good favor in the time of the Nixon White House that he could get a private interview with the President, saying yes, sir, there are too villains and none more

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Men went to die because Lincoln said they must and because Franklin Roosevelt said they must."

The grandeur and brilliance of the office is so great that White says he is mentally incapacitated when in the same room with a President: "I've been in the White House, in and out, now under five Presidents, and I'm always scared when I speak to a President. Some people go in there and they freeze up and they forget what they're going to ask the President . . . I always have had that sense of awe, so that normally, if I do want to speak to a President, I will send a note in advance saying, 'I want to talk to you about this and this and this' . . ."

There must be tourists waiting in line with their Kodaks who're in better emotional shape to observe what's going on in the Presidential mansion than the gaga White: "The White House is an eerie place. It's so quiet and it's so hushed and it's so beautiful . . . There are buttons there that run everywhere. They can drop bombs or build hospitals or whatever you want."

White wants to worship. As he

connected establishmentarian journalist thinks and looks at the part of the world he reports on. As such he can be allowed to stand as a representative of a number of others who once had many flattering things to write about Nixon and now must occasionally wonder how they could have been so badly had.

"There are no saints and no villains in history," White says, thereby making the conventional obeisance to upper class notions of complexity; but for White, Nixon is Milton's devil in "Paradise Lost," the best and most

says, "I suffer from incumbitis . . . I'm not going to be a spitball journalist." He also says, "We have a larger percentage of decent politicians in this country than in any other I've covered, and I respect most politicians (but) when I find a crook, I'll burn him. When I find a liar, I'll call him a liar."

With the eyes through which White sees, one wonders how he will ever catch a crook or discern a liar. By his own description White is not the most suspicious of men, but crook-catching isn't the primary business of journalists. Their primary business is, regardless of their ideology, understanding the world intelligently enough to be able to distinguish what might conceivably be thought of as news from official diapasons of glory. White couldn't, nor did most of the other renowned names in journalism; and, while you might say that the last time out the crooks were caught, it wasn't by journalists but by police reporters, and that may be why people in our business are the first to know and the last to understand.