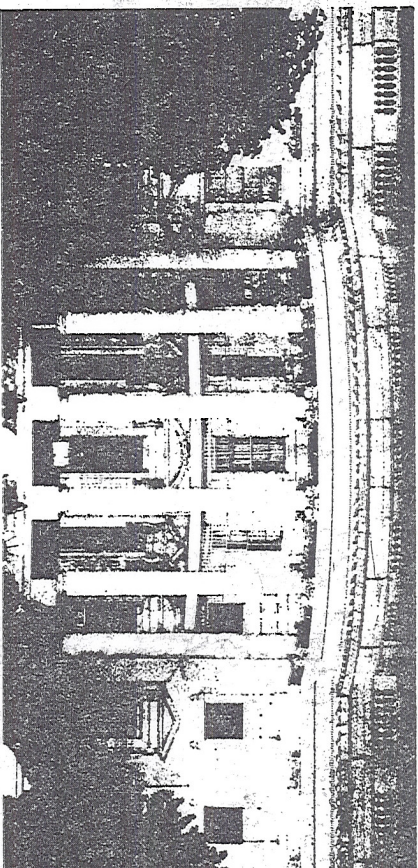
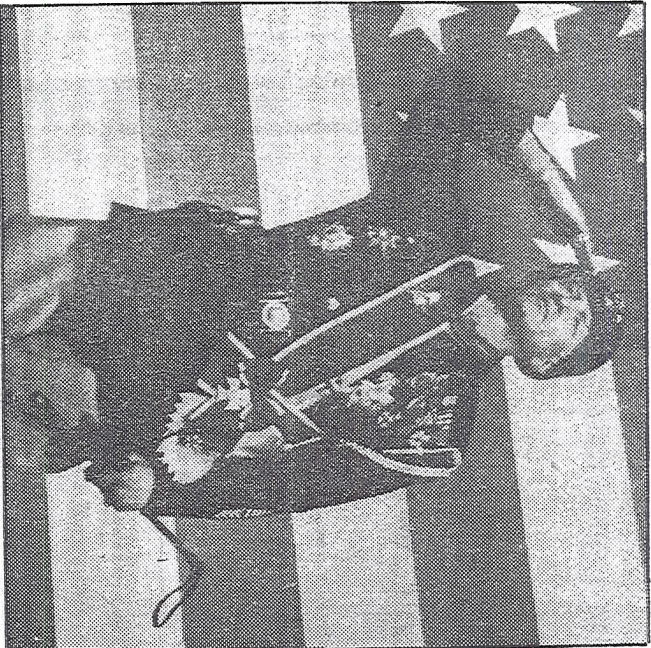


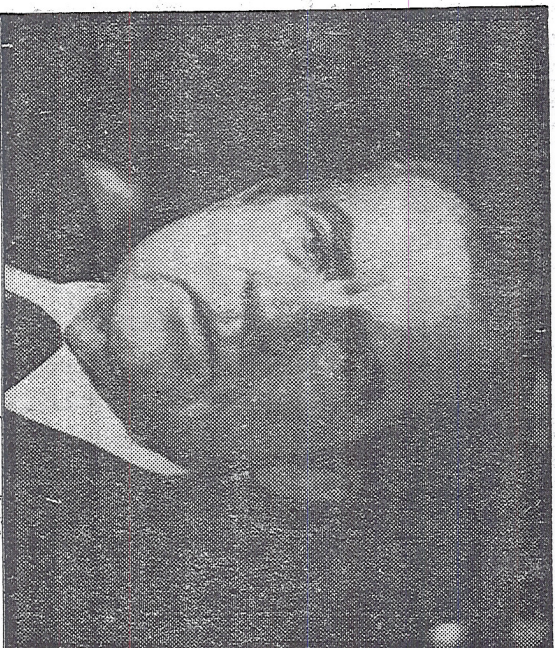
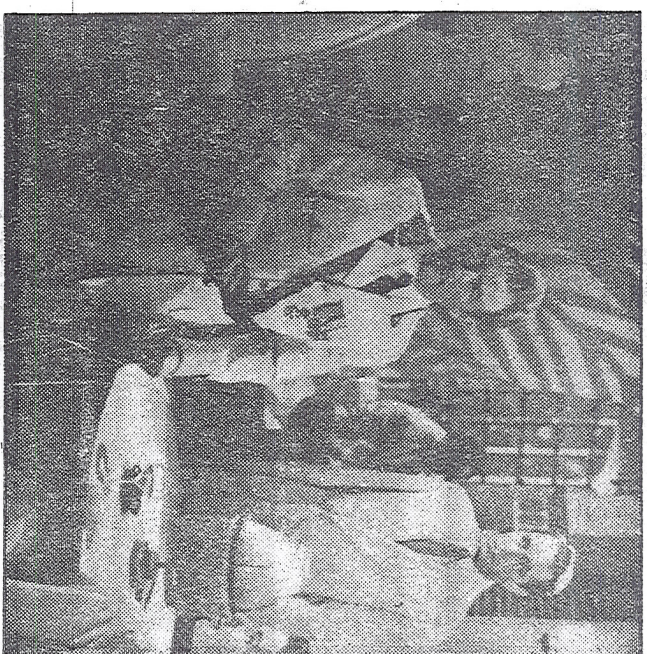
Presidents and Movies: Some Command Performances

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Clockwise from bottom left: President Nixon; George C. Scott in a scene from "Patton," a Nixon favorite; the White House; Humphrey Bogart, Claude Rains, Paul Henreid and Ingrid Bergman in "Casablanca," a Kennedy favorite; President Kennedy.



By Ronald Flannini
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On Friday, July 12, 1974, the day the House Judiciary Committee released its Watergate evidence cataloging the abuses of power in the Nixon White House, Richard Nixon edged the day with a movie: It was "Double Indemnity." Two days later, he watched "Touch of Evil." On July 22, as the committee vote to impeach him moved inexorably closer, Nixon saw... "It's a Wonderful Life." The source of these bizarre revelations is a former member of the Nixon White House staff who was in a position to know such things. In Nixon's last

month in office, the source says, a movie was ordered for presidential viewing practically every night, either in the White House movie theater or at San Clemente.

Chosen for him by his daughter Julie, the films were mostly old box-office favorites. (Would you believe "By the Light of the Silvery Moon" and "That Hamilton Woman," a screen incarnation of the Lord Nelson affair?) One can picture Nixon, a loner in the best of times, sitting by himself in the dark screening room as if seeking temporary refuge from the storm that was scudding down upon him. On July 18, he saw "Two for the Seesaw"; on July 25, the first part of "Around the World in Eighty Days"; for some reason, the

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screening was interrupted and resumed the following night.

By Aug. 3, the House Judiciary Committee had passed the three articles of impeachment, charging the President with obstruction of justice in attempting to cover up Watergate: that night, "Ten Tall Men" was playing at the White House. Then, on Aug. 5, four days before his resignation, Nixon saw "The Serpent," a film about skuldugery in the CIA.

Nixon's practice of watching movies as a distraction from the pressure of Watergate has many respectable antecedents. Herbert Hoover liked movies, and his friend Louis B. Mayer kept him supplied with them. Franklin D. Roosevelt used to collect his brain trust around him and relax watching Mickey Mouse cartoons. Dwight Eisenhower was a regular filmgoer. At the height of the Cuban Missile Crisis, John Kennedy took time off to see "The Longest Day," not so much because he sought inspiration from the Normandy invasion, but because he wanted to watch his brother-in-law, Peter Lawford, who had a starring role.

The movies have continued the tradition of presidential interest in the performing arts as a form of relaxation (though in their cultural pursuits Presidents have otherwise tended to reflect the popular American view that a love of the arts is a very marginal quality in a politician). George Washington was fond of the theater and went often; "School for Scandal" was one of his favorite plays. It was Lincoln's taste for comedy that brought him to Ford's Theater on April 14, 1865, to see Laura Keane's final performance in the city of "Our American Cousin." Woodrow Wilson shocked his intellectual friends by his

regular Monday visits to the Keith vaudeville house close by the White House, finding it an excellent form of escape.

The White House tends to keep quiet about what movies the President and his family see, partly because this is classified as a private activity, and partly to avoid endorsing movies. But sometimes on the daily White House tours the guide will point out the small, windowless room in the east wing of the Executive Mansion that has served as a movie theater since FDR's time. With its bare, pale green walls and carpet, it is hardly a movie palace. It has four big lounge chairs in front, with several rows of chairs behind them, and a retractable 16-foot screen attached to the ceiling. But the room, which has a capacity of about 80 people, serves several other purposes, ranging from occasional briefing room to hatcheck room during large White House receptions.

There is a projectionist on call at all times because the President, or a member of his family, can demand to see a movie at any hour of the day or night. The White House can obtain any movie of which a print is in existence, but the pictures the President sees tend to be borrowed free of charge from Washington theaters and exchanges. (The President is also supplied movies for screening at Camp David and other presidential retreats; in Nixon's case, Key Biscayne, in Johnson's, the Texas ranch.)

Roosevelt perceived Hollywood's power, then at its peak, and to some extent he can be said to have courted the movie industry. Stars were invited to the big bashes at the White House, such as his birthday parties. Eleanor Roosevelt's byline appeared in leading fan magazines like Photoplay. She wrote about a variety of topics: "Film

Folk I Have Known," screen violence, etc. The Roosevelts were avid movie fans, the press concluded, and there was some truth in this, except that FDR often fell asleep if the picture failed to hold his attention. And it was whispered that he slept through "Gone With the Wind."

Harry Truman preferred reading books to watching movies for relaxation; he loved music and had a liking for movies in which serious music played an important part, such as "Tales of Hoffmann," the ambitious if rather foolhardy British attempt to combine opera and ballet in a popular film. But his successor, Dwight Eisenhower, was the quintessential American moviegoer, the sort of man Hollywood had been catering to for decades.

Eisenhower probably saw more movies in the White House than all other U.S. Presidents before and since combined. Three evenings a week when he was in residence in the White House, Eisenhower would take his seat in the movie theater precisely at 7:40 p.m., either alone or with his dinner guests. His taste in films was rooted in his middlebrow Midwestern background. While he was on a state visit to England, Prime Minister Harold Macmillan arranged a screening of Laurence Olivier's "Richard III" as part of the entertainment. The picture was changed at the last minute to "Tiger Bay," an unpretentious little thriller, as if someone had told the British that the President was in no mood for Shakespeare at the end of a hard day.

Eisenhower loved Westerns, and he loved musicals. One of the few movies he specifically asked to see was "The Big Country." A print was shipped to Washington from the studio as soon as it was completed, and the President saw the movie four times in a row. His

second most favorite picture was "Seven Brides for Seven Brothers"; he sat through it three times in a month and would leave the theater humming the tunes. His favorite movie star was John Wayne; he didn't care for Robert Mitchum because he didn't care for his offscreen reputation; he disapproved of the vogue for Audie Murphy movies, feeling that the most decorated soldier of World War II didn't sit tall enough in the saddle.

Dramas Eisenhower was prepared to take on merit, but he detested sentimental pictures. In this he differed from his wife who preferred them to anything else. After he had walked out on "Peyton Place" one night, it was decreed that Mrs. Eisenhower could watch whatever movies she wanted to—in the afternoon. But there were to be no more "Peyton Place"s at night.

The first picture shown in the Kennedy White House was De Sica's "General Della Rovere"; a few days later came "La Dolce Vita." Here truly was a new frontier. Well, yes and no. Such exotic fare reflected Jackie's taste more than it did the President's. Her interest in movies was cosmopolitan; he was a film buff of a more traditional stamp—open-minded, to be sure, but left to his own devices Kennedy preferred Hollywood to Cinecitta. A woman friend from his bachelor days recalls that a date with the young senator almost invariably included a movie, and Kenny O'Donnell, one of his political aides, says that during the 1960 presidential campaign it was not unusual for Kennedy to end a grueling day on the hustings unwinding in a movie theater watching "Casablanca," "The Sands of Iwo Jima," or another of his all-time favorites. At the time, he liked Randolph Scott, O'Donnell remembers, but his enduring screen hero was John Wayne.

The movies the Kennedys saw in the

White House theater, which was equipped with an orthopedic bed to favor the President's bad back, were a combination of both their preferences. Hollywood favorites such as "Roman Holiday" and "Sabrina" blended with foreign classics; movies acquired a new status at the White House. There are many stories about Kennedy the movie fan. One day he asked to see "Spartacus," but the White House equipment couldn't handle the 70mm print. So the President simply walked over to a nearby movie theater where the new Stanley Kubrick picture was playing. Afterward, the theater manager told him the picture was doing poor business and was about to close. "I think it's better than 'Ben-Hur,'" Kennedy replied. The comment was picked up by the papers, giving "Spartacus" a much-needed boost.

"Lyndon Johnson just didn't like to be alone in dark places," says one of his aides. Talking on the telephone was the way he unwound." During his presidency television gained ascendancy over the movies as presidential entertainment, and the movie theater was converted into a TV studio, with a camera set up to film Johnson whenever he decided to go before the nation. When he did watch a movie, it was usually late at night, and he was quite liable to walk out without warning halfway through if he lost interest.

Some day, psychohistorians may study the films that Presidents watched for clues to their behavior in the White House. There is already a glimmer of this in the story that Nixon was overwhelmed by "Patton" and that repeated viewing of this blood-and-thunder George C. Scott film bolstered his hawkish resolve to pursue the Vietnam war. The same Nixon source quoted earlier says White House records show that the President saw "Patton" on three occasions,

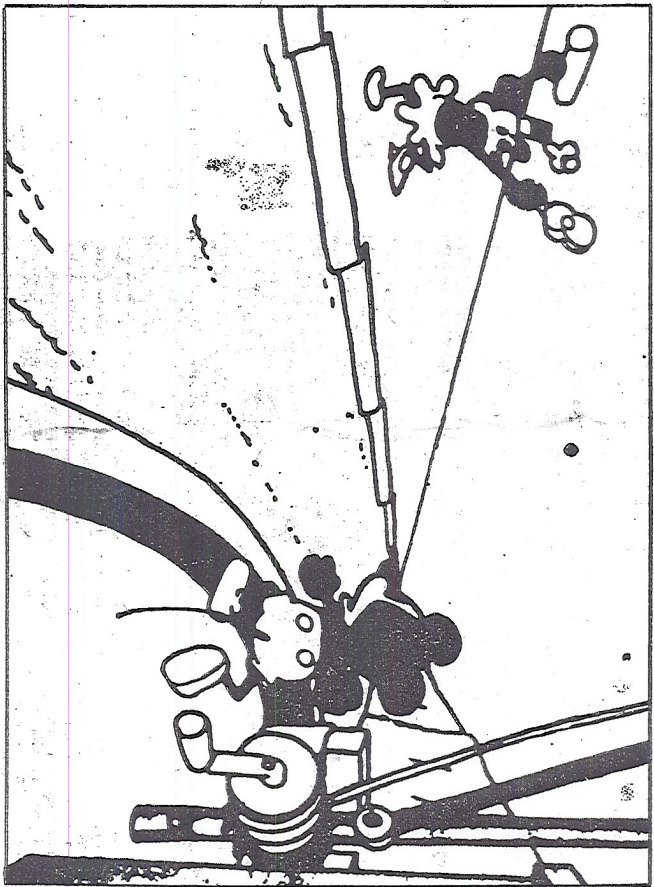
which is just about as many times as Kennedy watched "Casablanca."

During Nixon's presidency, the White House theater was back in business; he watched movies regularly, sometimes with Pat (who had had a brief fling at a movie career before marriage), or friends like Bebe Rebozo, but quite frequently alone. He liked cop pictures from the '30s and '40s, and Westerns of any vintage. Edward G. Robinson was one of his favorite actors, and—once again—John Wayne and Clint Eastwood. There was a standing order to rush any new Eastwood picture to the White House as soon as a print was available.

The White House steers clear of pictures containing too much sex, violence, or foul language unless they are specifically requested by the President, or someone in the family. According to reliable sources, a porno film has yet to flash across the White House screen—no "Deep Throat," or "The Devil in Miss Jones." But when Nixon was asked to confirm that he wanted to see "Dirty Harry" despite the gore and foul language, he replied, "Eastwood can do no wrong, let's see the picture."

Presidential attendance has again dropped off considerably at the movies since Gerald Ford took office. He has watched perhaps half a dozen films at the White House—including "That's Entertainment, Part II"—since he took office two years ago, plus a few more at Camp David.

With the coming election, the presidential movie theater stands on the threshold of another potential change in its fortunes. But whether a Southern Democrat or middle-America Republican wins in November, some traditions are sure to remain and the White House Bijou will likely be one of them.



Presidential favorites, from left: John Wayne (Eisenhower, Kennedy, Nixon), Mickey Mouse (FDR)



and Clint Eastwood (Nixon).