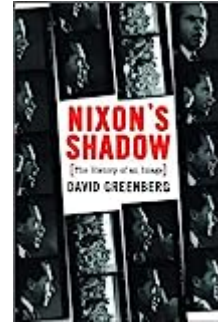




David Greenberg. *Nixon's Shadow: The History of an Image.* New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2003. xxxii + 460 pp. \$26.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-393-04896-4.



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Nixon's Still the One

Richard Nixon, more than any other public figure of his day, seemed to embody the passions and controversies of American political life in the second half of the twentieth century. Like Mr. Jingle in Dickens's novel *The Pickwick Papers*, Nixon was always on the scene, doggedly climbing back onto the stage even when his opponents were convinced he was finished. He first ran for Congress in 1946, and within six years he was not only the Republican Party's vice presidential candidate, but also the most controversial figure of the 1952 presidential campaign, loved and loathed in equal measure. In 1956, he was renominated for the vice presidency despite the misgivings of Dwight D. Eisenhower. In 1960, he ran for the presidency in his own right, and lost one of the closest elections of all time to his great rival, John F. Kennedy. He lost the 1962 California gubernatorial election to Edmund G. Brown and apparently signed his own political death warrant with a bitter concession speech, but within two years he was on the trail again, vigorously campaigning on behalf of Barry Goldwater.

In 1968, Nixon completed an unprecedented political comeback by winning the Republican presidential

nomination and then the general election against Hubert Humphrey. He was reelected in 1972, winning forty-nine states and more than 60 percent of the vote, a landslide victory comparable only with Roosevelt's triumph in 1936. Even in 1976, disgraced by the Watergate scandal, Nixon cast a heavy shadow over the presidential election. Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, he remained an unmistakable presence, writing, lecturing, giving interviews, and commenting on international affairs. By the time of his death in 1994, his return to American public life, as a vocal and visible ex-president, was complete.

As David Greenberg argues in the introduction to his fascinating book *Nixon's Shadow*, among twentieth-century political figures only Franklin D. Roosevelt really compares to Nixon in terms of ubiquity, influence and impact. "For the epoch of the Cold War, the Red Scare, Vietnam, Watergate and malaise," Greenberg writes, "Nixon—as opposed to the Kennedy of Camelot or the Reagan of "Morning in America"—seems the most fitting avatar" (xiii). Despite the adulation of Ronald Reagan among present-day Republican politicians, it was Nixon, not Reagan or Goldwater, who was most closely associated

with the recasting of the Republican Party as a vehicle for conservative populism. Just as Roosevelt had put together a new, successful, enduring Democratic coalition in the mid-1930s, so Nixon, between 1968 and 1972, built a new Republican Party, welding together an alliance of mid-western farmers, northern workers, western conservatives, and southern populists. This alliance would account for Reagan's victories in 1980 and 1984 as well as those of the Bush family in 1988 and 2000. As Greenberg points out, Nixon was not, as is often imagined, a "bit player" or an interruption in the long march of the right; he was the central figure in the story of how populist conservatism became the most powerful and dynamic force in modern American politics (p. 7).

Greenberg's objective is not to write a new biography of Richard Nixon, although given the archival discoveries of recent years, such a book is undoubtedly overdue. Instead he tries to do something very different, to write what he calls "a cultural history of Nixon ... a history of his image" (xi). He looks at what Nixon meant to different groups, from the Washington press corps and the grandees of Democratic liberalism to the ordinary voters of California and the historians of the 1980s and 1990s. Unlike many political historians, he is comfortable using sources dredged from the depths of post-war popular culture: plays, television shows, Hollywood films, rock songs, and underground newspapers. Readers accustomed to dry discussions of public policy or plodding narratives of campaigns and elections will be surprised to see sections on Lynyrd Skynyrd or Star Trek. Indeed, one of the highlights of the book is Greenberg's discussion of the film, *Dick*, an uproarious spoof of *All the President's Men*, which follows the exploits of two teenage girls as they penetrate the Nixon White House and unveil the Watergate cover-up (pp. 178-179).

Nixon is an ideal subject for a book of this kind. For one thing, he is closely linked in the public imagination with the expansion of the media after the Second World War. His television appearances, from the Checkers speech of 1952 and the presidential debates of 1960 to his resignation address in 1974, have entered political folklore. What is more, Nixon was peculiarly fascinated by the way he was perceived in the media, partly because he was transfixed by the memory of the 1960 debates, but also because of his fierce desire to be liked by his fellow citizens. As president, he created the White House office of communications and the first White House office that dealt specifically with television. He was also the first chief executive to employ a full-time director of public relations, the former advertising executive and future

Watergate conspirator, Jeb Stuart Magruder. The Watergate tapes, the Haldeman diaries, and other sources for his administration reveal a president who was simply obsessed with his treatment by the newspapers and television networks, and who was, disastrously, convinced that aggressive public relations could conceal the reality of the Watergate burglary.

Greenberg probably goes too far in arguing that Nixon "ushered in a new candidate-centered politics." He also pays too little attention to the ways in which Nixon's predecessors, especially Roosevelt and Kennedy, had similarly manipulated the media to elevate themselves above their party, and to conceal their personal disabilities from the public (p. 35). But he is nevertheless right to see Nixon as a president for whom image became a crippling obsession. Only Nixon could have sent a memorandum to his press secretary with instructions to "tell the [Hugh] Sidey types that RN has become a regular bowler at Camp David at weekends ... His average is around 130 to 140 and his best game to date is 204." To make his expertise perfectly clear, Nixon even added: "He has never bowled before except for a couple of occasions at Camp David in 1960." [1] Unfortunately, Nixon's efforts to convince the public that he was a Kennedyesque man of action were rarely successful. Greenberg tells the well-known story of the president's project to claim the Kennedy mantle by having his photograph taken strolling casually along the beach at San Clemente. Carefully selected reporters and photographers were brought to the chosen location where, after a brief interval, the familiar profile of Richard Nixon hove into view. Striding stiffly across the sands in a windbreaker, smart suit trousers, and gleaming black wing-tip shoes, grinning awkwardly, Nixon looked the very picture of a man for whom the beach was unfamiliar and unpleasant territory (xxix).

Greenberg's aim in *In Nixon's Shadow*, however, is less to show how the president himself manipulated and projected his image than to show how different constituencies regarded him. Perhaps the most striking section is his discussion of Nixon's image among the liberals of the fifties, including the likes of Eleanor Roosevelt, Adlai Stevenson, and Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. Younger readers in particular will be struck by the sheer vitriol with which they regarded the youthful Nixon. Harry Truman said that Nixon was one of only two men he had ever hated; Adlai Stevenson commented that he was the one politician he "really loathed." Upon hearing Nixon's name at a dinner party, he reportedly exclaimed, "Please! Not while I'm eating!" For his part, John F. Kennedy

called Nixon a “son of a bitch” and a “bastard” (p. 37).

But as Greenberg shows, the usual explanation that this was a reaction to Nixon’s past as a red-baiter simply will not do. Nixon’s early successes in California owed more to his image as a man of the people than to his record as an anti-Communist, and few observers in the early 1950s thought that his campaign against Jerry Voorhis or his treatment of Alger Hiss was anything out of the ordinary. Only in retrospect were these incidents exaggerated into instances of Nixon’s supposed corruption and general unpleasantness. It is striking that in 1950 his Democratic opponent in the senatorial election, Helen Gahagan Douglas, actually attacked Nixon as being soft on Communism himself. Greenberg even quotes a New York reporter, Earl Mazo, who “despised” Nixon and in the late fifties set out to write a biography that would “cut him up.” But Mazo, an honest and hard-working reporter, found out “that so much of what I knew to be total fact, had rated as fact, even written as fact, was just total horseshit. I ended up ... having an enormous amount of respect for the guy” (p. 134).

In fact, liberal disdain for Nixon was deeply rooted in class prejudice. To patricians like Stevenson and Kennedy, Nixon seemed irredeemably suburban, gauche, and mundane, and he spoke for a constituency, later called “Middle America,” that they regarded with dismissive contempt. His use of television and advertising techniques, most famously during the Checkers affair in 1952, led many commentators to associate him with the supposed corrosive mindlessness of modern mass culture. In the liberal mind, he became a symbol not merely of Republican anti-Communism, but also of the tawdry, pitiful tastes and prejudices of small-town Americans. Richard Rovere thought that he had “no gift for bonhomie”; Stewart Alsop’s wife mocked him as a “terrible dancer”; Schlesinger condemned him for liking hamburgers but not champagne; and a letter to the *New Republic* commented that Nixon was “not the sort of man one would care to ask for dinner” (p. 45).

As Greenberg remarks, their hatred of Nixon betrayed their own “distance from, and even scorn for, those Americans ... who saw Nixon as their earnestly striving spokesman” (p. 39). This kind of snobbery frequently boiled over into outright hatred, and in this context, it is not hard to see why a sensitive, insecure man like the young Nixon ended up haunted by his own resentments. Indeed, these attitudes toward Nixon, best summed up as “Nixon-hating,” did not die out after his resignation from office in 1974, and Greenberg shows

how they endure to this day. A good example is the genre of psycho-biographies devoted to the late president. Without exception, they portray him as unhealthy and unbalanced, “an insecure, narcissistic personality” scarred by his parents and driven from childhood by insecurity and anger (p. 244). Greenberg rightly remarks that these biographies pay so much attention to Nixon’s character flaws, and so little to his strengths, that they completely fail to “explain how he had risen as high as he did” (p. 266).

Greenberg does a superb job of explaining why liberals, some elements among the Washington press corps, and the New Left radicals of the late 1960s came to hate and despise Nixon so much. The sections in which he charts the creation of Nixon’s aggressive, venal, conspiratorial reputation will be hard to match. He is less successful, however, at explaining precisely why Nixon was so popular with so many people for so long. With his name on the ticket in no fewer than five presidential elections, four of which ended with him on the winning side, Nixon was the most successful campaigner in the history of the Republican Party. Greenberg hints at the nature of his appeal in his chapter on the California conservatives. Discussing the Checkers speech, he comments that “it demonstrated Nixon’s affinity for ordinary, middle-class families, his capacity for straightforward talk, his authenticity,” and suggests that to millions of voters, Nixon was “the American everyman” (p. 32). This image clearly endured: even after the humiliating revelations of Nixon’s complicity in the Watergate cover-up, slightly less than a third of all Americans still supported him. But Greenberg does not really explain why this was so, and in particular he does not explain why it was Nixon, rather than one of his many rivals, who best captured the spirit of what he called “the Silent Majority.”

Like the psycho-biographers he criticizes, Greenberg does not always acknowledge Nixon’s undoubted strengths: his capacity for hard work, his quick mind, his determination, his ability to inspire immense loyalty in others. Indeed there are occasional indications that, despite his generally judicious and even-handed approach, Greenberg shares some of the prejudices of the Stevensons and the Kennedys. Nixon does not walk to the lectern to deliver his farewell remarks; he “sidles” (p. 207). At a dinner in 1986, after a making a joke about Watergate, he gives not a smile but a “smirk” (p. 290). Greenberg even disparages Nixon’s intellect: he lines his bookshelves with “Tolstoy’s works [and] biographies of Napoleon and Churchill ... not the kind that intellectuals were reading in the 1980s or 1990s,” as though, to

prove his credentials, Nixon ought, rather implausibly, to have been buying the latest books by Noam Chomsky or Jean Baudrillard (p. 273). And Greenberg is also surprisingly quick to dismiss claims by Nixon's adoring loyalists that he had been harshly treated by comparison with, say, Presidents Kennedy and Johnson. Of course, their wrongdoings cannot mitigate the evidence of Nixon's own misbehaviour, which is now being produced in ever greater quantities as more tape transcripts are released. But it is hard to resist the suspicion that, had Nixon behaved in the White House with the self-indulgent abandon of a Kennedy, his critics would be altogether harder on him than they have been towards his Democratic predecessor.

In the final chapter of the book, a splendid overview of Nixon's reputation among academic historians, Greenberg takes issue with the revisionists of the 1980s and 1990s who cast Nixon as, in many respects, the last liberal president. He questions whether "the assumptions of the moment" may have led them to exaggerate Nixon's accomplishments in comparison with the conservative record of Reagan and Clinton (p. 331). He quotes with approval the pre-eminent Watergate scholar Stanley Kutler: "Historians must judge the past by the standards of that past, not their own" (p. 327). But as Greenberg demonstrates, the past yields no absolute and uncontentious standards by which to judge Richard Nixon, or, for that matter, any other historical figure. For every "Nixon-hater," there was a "Watergate-denier"; for every disapproving Democrat, an adoring Republican. Histori-

ans necessarily ask questions of the past that reflect the concerns and assumptions of the present. So it is hardly surprising that, from the viewpoint of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, Nixon's relatively progressive domestic record on issues like welfare, the environment, and economic management makes for a striking contrast with his successors of both parties.

But it also reflects on the power of Nixon's other images, principally that of the president as a sinister criminal conspirator, that this new academic consensus has failed to make much headway with the public at large. Indeed, as of October 2000, the Nixon mask was still the top-selling political Halloween costume. And as Greenberg remarks in the conclusion to this closely researched and always entertaining book, although other images of Nixon—"the populist, the victim, the statesman, the liberal"—have their adherents, it is the image of "Tricky Dick" that still has the strongest appeal (pp. 345-346). One thing, however, seems certain: that Richard Nixon, the most controversial president of modern times, in many ways the most able and undoubtedly one of the most flawed, will continue to divide opinions for many years to come.

Note

[1]. Richard Nixon to Ron Ziegler, June 16 1969, reprinted in Bruce Oudes, ed., *From: The President: Richard Nixon's Secret Files* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1988), p. 34.

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