

In Search of the Real Nixon

By Mel Lavine

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The lady Friend and I went down to Southern California to see the Nixon Library in Yorba Linda. The Watergate tapes were the hook. Although the information was not news, Nixon remains an evergreen subject, not just for journalists and historians but for psychiatrists as well.

I was working at NBC in the Watergate years, 1972-4, so Watergate is still fresh for me. Years earlier in 1962 I'd interviewed Nixon when he came through Eureka when he was running for governor of California against Pat Brown. He reminded me of a traveling actor, a good one: Hamlet this afternoon, Richard III or Macbeth tonight. Politicians are actors; the best usually wind up in the highest offices.

Watergate began as an attempted burglary of Democratic National Headquarters at the Watergate complex in Washington, D.C., with the arrest of five agents of the Committee to Reelect Nixon. The date was June 17, 1972. The bungled break-in sparked a chain of discoveries over the next two years that was to unravel the worst political scandal in American history.

Nixon was in the Bahamas on the day of the break-in. Three days later on June 20 he was back in Washington meeting with his chief of staff, H. R. "Bob" Haldeman. It is the tape of this conversation where there is a mysterious 18 1/2-minute gap that experts concluded had been erased. You hear no voices, but buzzing and clicking. Your imagination does all the work.

In another excerpt from the tapes, Nixon is heard complaining, "The government is full of Jews, and generally speaking, you can't trust the bastards." He did, however, exempt Jews like Henry Kissinger and William Safire, the columnist.

Over a period of two years numerous offenses were linked to Nixon or people acting in his name. One was an Enemies List which, according to a White House memo, was intended to use the federal bureaucracy to "screw our political enemies." The CBS correspondent Daniel Shore was such a target, "a real media enemy."

Nixon wondered what an agency (like the FBI or IRS, for example) was told when a request was made seeking confidential information on someone whose reputation the White House wanted destroyed. In Daniel Shore's case it was, said the Nixon aide, that the journalist was being considered for a high administration post, the remark causing both men to chuckle.

In the end, Nixon acknowledged misleading the country after claiming he did not know of the cover-up until early 1973. A tape revealed that Nixon had been told of the White House connection soon after the burglaries occurred, and that he had OK'd a strategy to foil the investigation. Facing certain impeachment he stepped down on August 9, 1974, the first president to resign from the office. He died in 1994 at 81 after suffering a stroke.

A friend, who I'd told of my visit to the library, wrote to say, "Your search for the real Nixon was a quest that will never end for those who really care about America."

He had in mind, for example, that the same Nixon, who rose to power as a fierce anti-communist, journeyed to China in 1972 to begin the normalization of relations between China and the U.S. It was a trip no Democratic president could afford to make.

"What a strange bird he was," my friend said of our 37th president.

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