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Fixin' Nixon

by [Andrew Stuttaford](#)

On *Richard M. Nixon: A Life in Full* by Conrad Black.

Judging by the tone and the content, if not the length, of his epic, sprawling, and (on several levels) fascinating new biography of Richard Nixon, Conrad Black is not inclined to attempt much analysis of what, ultimately, made Tricky Dick tick. [1] There have, he snorts, “been many amateur psychoanalyses of Nixon, [but] none of any apparent validity or value.” *None?* When Black refers to the “psycho-media speculation” contained within press coverage of the various medical disasters that befell the former president in the immediate aftermath of his resignation, he doesn’t mean it as a term of approbation.

Now it is true that Nixon did have to put up with more than his fair share of long-distance psychoanalysis (so much so, in fact, that when David Greenberg wrote *Nixon’s Shadow* [2003], a valuable study of shifting perceptions of the thirty-seventh president, he devoted an entire chapter to “the psychobiographers”), and more than a fair share of that was nonsense, make-a-buck flimflam, or propaganda masquerading as science. At the same time, there can have been few presidents whose behavior did more to attract this sort of attention. Nobody should expect the occupants of the Oval Office to be regular folks, and few of them have been. Nevertheless, even when compared with other members of this often eccentric fraternity, there’s something about Nixon’s psyche that makes it stand out in its strangeness, its melancholy, its *noir*, and its mystery.

In part, of course, this reflects Nixon’s misfortune (for a man who achieved so much, Nixon was, as Black demonstrates, remarkably unlucky) to be living at a time when increasing (and frequently hostile) media scrutiny combined with the mid-century infatuation with psychiatry to ensure that almost no aspect of his career or character was not picked apart. If his predecessors had received similar treatment, Nixon would not have seemed *quite* so peculiar.

Nixon himself understood that he was something of a puzzle, and rather relished it. In *President Nixon—Alone in the White House* (2001), his intriguing account of the Nixon presidency, Richard Reeves recounts how Bob Dole once told Nixon “that he was destined to be misunderstood because he was too complicated a man to be totally understood.” Nixon had responded to that with enthusiasm, saying, “Aha! Now you’re getting somewhere.” Reeves then goes on to argue that Nixon “did not want to be understood. If other men thought he was unreadable, then they must think there was a great deal more inside him than just a powerful mind voyaging alone in anger and self-doubt.”

You can debate the second part of that diagnosis, but not the first: Nixon clearly did not want to be understood. That doesn’t mean, however, that a biographer should avoid trying to do so. Black doesn’t, but his efforts too often come across as more a matter of (deftly chosen) adjectives than

anything more substantial. Even if one makes allowance for Black's distaste for such analysis, his failure to deliver more of it diminishes the roundedness of his book, and is, in such a perceptive author, a disappointment. What his readers are offered instead is a biography where, with the notable exception of the canny, and feline, depiction of Kissinger, politics tend to be handled more convincingly than personality, a chronicle where the emphasis is on the event rather than the individual. Black, the author of a notable biography of FDR, is evidently a writer who prefers to focus his attention on the external, on great men, on momentous events and the grandest of themes. The rest, I'd guess, he sees as trivia, little more than gossip. Nixon would approve.

To read Black's book is to be treated like the guest at a lavish dinner party presided over by an opinionated, brilliant, mordantly amusing, powerful, and loquacious host. As the port is passed round and the cigars light up, the host holds forth—for hours and hours (this work is easily over a thousand pages long) and hours. Glasses are drained and doubts drowned. Stories tumble out, anecdotes cascade. Portentous verdicts are cast: the opening to Communist China “was an imaginative diplomatic initiative of great geopolitical consequences ... but to the extent it was sold, then and subsequently, as a combination of Columbian exploration, Bismarckian diplomacy, and Jesuitical missionary work, it was a confidence trick to reelect the president, pad the CVs of the two explorer/diplomat/pilgrims, and garnish the post-governmental wallet of Kissinger.” Lapidary pronouncements are made: “Nixon's trousers were slightly too short (often the case with Americans).” Widespread rumors are discounted: Nixon tells the author that “Edgar [Hoover] had a lot of files, but I had a lot of files too, and there was nothing in them about Edgar in a red dress.” Erudite digressions are explored: “Disraeli was rivaled only by Churchill as the greatest wit of all British prime ministers.” And insidery recollections are shared:

His office was another Nixonian classic. It was reached by walking through a large travel agency on the ground floor of a building on a suburban boulevard, then taking an elevator up two floors, opening a box with a bronze eagle on it, and announcing oneself on the telephone receiver within.

All this is filtered through, and often illuminated by, our host's distinctive, distinctly orotund, use of language. He deploys a startling, imposing, and baroque phraseology. Black's language is never dull, but it does teeter between the enlightening (the Democratic-led “assault on Nixon” had become “the rape of the executive”), the arch (“the influx of newcomers to California ... tended to be conventional southerners well to the right politically of the egalitarian EPIC group, which had believed in collective economics and the absence of complexional distinctions”), the absurd (“malignant Nibelungen within the IRS”), the Agnew (“It was another herniating levitation of pandemic hypocrisy”), the sly (“Kissinger tried a fully gymnastic range of explanations”), and occasionally the bizarre (Jesse Jackson as “rutting panther”).

And, no, as enjoyable as the occasion may be, the magnate's guests at this splendid feast will never entirely be able to shake off the sense that they are receiving a message *de haut en bas*. Black, Conrad Black, Lord Black of Crossharbour, was a newspaper mogul in the old style, a mover, a shaker, a *macher*, and it shows. Nixon gives “the annual Atlantic Richfield Dinner address in London in the autumn of 1992, and dazzle[s] the most eminent dinner audience that city could produce,” a dinner audience that included Lord Black, but not me, or in all probability, dear reader, you.

None of this is to detract from Black's ability to spin a “rocking, socking” (to borrow a term Nixon used to describe his more vigorous campaigns) yarn. A thousand pages, maybe, but they don't pall, and they are dauntingly thoroughly researched. The narrative is comprehensive, detailed, generally judicious and, in its careful assessment of Watergate, is closer to a plea in mitigation than an outright case for the defense. Overall, it's almost impossible and largely pointless to highlight any particular topic covered in those thousand pages, but if I have to choose one, it would be the subtle and

sympathetic way in which Black handles Nixon's tortured and complex dealings with a truly masterful trickster, the enigmatic, cunning, and ruthless Eisenhower.

Where the book fails is in "The Transfiguration," the book's ambitiously titled final chapter. The picture Black paints is of the painstaking, carefully crafted step-by-step creation of the last "new Nixon"—a largely rehabilitated figure, a much consulted, highly respected foreign policy sage, the grandfatherly "most successful ex-president in the country's history," a figure whose fate was apparently beginning to prick what Black refers to with characteristic melodrama as the "Great American Puritanical Conscience." This overstates matters. With the passing of the years, we have indeed witnessed the emergence of a fairer, more balanced assessment of Nixon (and this biography will help in that process). Some of the wilder accusations of the Watergate era have now been shown up for the ludicrous overreaction they always were, and as they have faded, so some of the luster has, at last, been restored to Nixon's reputation.

At the same time, it remains unclear just how seriously people really took Nixon's advice in those final years. Not so much, I reckon. As for the circles in which he was allegedly regarded as either martyred or, well, transfigured, they are, in their very different way, unlikely to have been much more representative than those of Pauline Kael; the *New Yorker* critic was supposedly unable to work out how Nixon could have won his 1972 landslide when "no one she knew" had voted for him (as it happens, she didn't actually say that, but the story's too good not to repeat). What works for Atlantic Richfield will not work so well in Atlantic City or, for that matter, anywhere else in America outside, perhaps, the Beltway and, certainly, Yorba Linda. The restoration of Nixon's image is far less complete than Black would have us believe.

It may not be the most scientific of tests, but the fact that, as David Greenberg records, masks of Nixon were the top-selling Halloween costumes in October 2000, over a quarter of a century after his resignation, must mean *something*. In the American popular imagination Nixon will always be seen primarily as a villain, albeit one who can sometimes be played for laughs, or pathos, or both. There were traces of that in Frank Langella's enthralling performance as the fallen president in the play *Frost/Nixon*, but Nixon fans may not find it entirely reassuring that Langella was previously best known as a notably effective Dracula.

It's difficult not to think that, in writing the final chapter in the way he did, Black may have allowed himself to be swayed by his hopes for his own future. In a still-disputed verdict, Black was found guilty last year of defrauding Hollinger International, the company he used to lead, as well as of obstruction of justice. He is currently appealing. Under the circumstances, the idea that Nixon (who was a friend of Black's) was able to pull off a comeback may well be a source of comfort, inspiration, and, Black might hope, precedent. The author himself has preferred to downplay the extent to which he identifies, or should be identified, with his subject, but choosing, while under indictment, to write a supportive (if still critical) life of a public figure whose most well-known line was that he was "not a crook" may be revealing and is indisputably provocative.

What Black cannot surely deny is that his understanding of what happened to Nixon has been colored by his own problems, whether it's on the reluctance of Henry Kissinger (once an appointee of Black's to the Hollinger International board, but now, it seems, somewhat estranged) to stand by the beleaguered Nixon or on the way that the use by prosecutors of plea bargains and whistleblowers has "encouraged a system of suborned or intimidated perjury, or at least spontaneous clarity of recollection, to move upwards in the inculcation of officials in any organization where wrongdoing is alleged." As so often, Black makes a good, if over-elaborately expressed, point.

It's worth adding that whatever else this volume reveals about Black's state of mind, its completion under what in the introduction are referred to as "very distracting circumstances" is also a phenomenal demonstration of discipline, willpower, and self-control. Yet again, Nixon would

approve.

Notes

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1. *Richard M. Nixon: A Life in Full*, by Conrad Black; Public Affairs, 1,168 pages, \$40. [Go back to the text.](#)

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