

Preface

I am honoured to present to the reader my master's thesis about the depiction of President Richard Nixon and the Watergate Affair in American popular culture. I hope the reader will be just as surprised by Richard Milhous Nixon as I was. I freely confess, as happens with many a historian who studies the same person for over a long time, that I have become a little attached to my subject – even if he was one of the most hated people in America. On the one hand I cannot help but feel that he did not deserve the hatred, because he did do some truly great things: he achieved a détente with Soviet Russia, he initiated the first SALT-treaty to limit the number of nuclear arms, and he normalised relations with China. And then there are those other things he did, for Native Americans, for the environment, and more. On the other hand, however, Watergate is simply inescapable. Nixon, in fact, committed serious crimes: he obstructed justice and he misused his power.

Watergate was a Faustian bargain for political power. But the bargain did not last. All came to light in one of the biggest political scandals that ever happened in the United States, and Nixon resigned. He was never sent to prison for these crimes. Instead, Nixon received a wholly different kind of punishment: he was, is, and will be disgraced for a long time. Nixon's was essentially a tragic fate. Directors such as Robert Altman and Oliver Stone have picked up on that. Both Nixon and the Watergate Affair have proved to be the inspiration for a great many works of popular culture; some are rich, complex and interesting, while other works are less subtle. A number of these works has been studied in great detail for this thesis, in order to examine how Nixon and the Watergate Affair have been perceived and represented.

This thesis could not have been written without the encouragement and support of my family and friends. I take this opportunity to thank my parents for their unconditional love and support and to thank my brother Gideon for his feedback and support. I also thank all of my friends (you know who you are!) for the interest they showed in this project and for the support they gave me. Last of all I thank Dr. Eduard van de Bilt for his advice, enthusiasm and supervision.

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Introduction

The Watergate Affair could easily have been a political thriller: a simple break-in eventually was linked to crimes and felonies committed in the uppermost echelons of political power. The motivation to commit these crimes was to keep a very powerful president in the seat of power, which would benefit those who surrounded him too.

However, it was not fiction, but one of the largest political scandals the United States had ever seen, which forced Richard Nixon to resign from the presidency. All of the hearings of the Senate Watergate Committee were transmitted on national television during the summer of 1973. The scandal had a tremendous impact on the way Americans looked upon their federal government. It also ruined Richard Nixon's reputation.

The affair, with all its intricacies and intrigues, is well-suited for film adaptations, historical novels and plays. The one film that would immediately spring to mind – for slightly older readers – would be the film *All the President's Men*, starring Dustin Hoffman and Robert Redford. Younger readers, when asked, usually named *Frost/Nixon* as a point of reference.

This thesis will discuss some of the best-known and lesser-known works of popular culture which have Richard Nixon and/or the Watergate Affair as their subject, in some way or other. The purpose of that exploration is simple: to examine how Richard Nixon has been portrayed in popular culture. Underlying questions appertain to the interaction between culture and politics, to the different ways in which one can tell a (political) story, to the historical accuracy of these works, to the discourse on Watergate as a whole, and to the influence of the Watergate Affair.

The discussion of the aforementioned works of popular culture will not only lead to a deeper understanding of the presidency of Richard Nixon and the Watergate affair, and of the works themselves, but will also facilitate a discussion of the underlying questions.

The first objective of this thesis is to put together a sample of works of films and novels concerning Richard Nixon and/or the Watergate Affair. The second objective that logically follows from the former is to establish how Richard Nixon is depicted in this sample. This carefully picked sample will be described further down. Is he simply portrayed as a crook and merely evil, or is he portrayed a three-dimensional figure? The third objective is to establish the degree of historical accuracy the works possess. What liberties did authors, playwrights and directors take with the facts, and why? In achieving these three objectives, it is necessary to look very closely at each and every one of the selected works.

However, in order to address the other issues and to gain a broader view of the subject, it will also be necessary to look at the selection of works from a somewhat larger distance. A comparative analysis makes it possible to study both the specifics of one particular work and the specifics of a group of works. When the group of works is sizeable and varied enough, this would permit one, very carefully, to establish some generalizations on the subject. Consequently, the fourth objective is to establish what characteristics the group of works of popular culture on Richard Nixon share with each other, and, how, generally speaking, Richard Nixon is portrayed in this group of works, and in what different ways and genres the story has been told.

Subsequently, I will try to find out what the larger cultural significance of these works is – the fifth and final objective. Do or did they have much influence? Did they change the way people looked upon the Watergate Affair and did they change their opinion on Richard Nixon? Did the works have any political consequences?

The wider significance of this thesis is to establish whether a re-evaluation of Nixon is already under way, or whether perhaps this should be necessary. After all, historians can no longer say that Nixon was simply a criminal, the only president to resign for fear of ending up in prison. Or, that he dragged out Vietnam for much longer than necessary, and, on the bright side, that he normalised relations with USSR and the Republic of China. In the light of theories about the cycles of corruption one can question the inevitability of the affair, and in the light of theories about the

imperial presidency (Arthur Schlesinger Jr.), one can question Nixon's abuse of power – after all many other presidents preceded him in it.

Nixon was and will always be a controversial figure in American history. This makes him all the more interesting. While the Watergate Affair left a big scar, politically and culturally, it is worth it to examine it from a somewhat different perspective, namely the perspective of popular culture. Due to his (tragic) downfall and his character flaws, Nixon is exceptionally suitable for Shakespearian tragedies, as well as for (political) satire and comedy. Nixon's downfall led to interesting works by Gore Vidal, Philip Roth and Oliver Stone – to name but a few.

With all of the above taken into account, the main research question of this thesis is to be as follows: How is Richard Nixon portrayed in various works of popular fiction and films concerning, in some way or other, himself and/or the Watergate Affair?¹ This question takes the literary works and films as a starting point, and clearly addresses the main purpose of this thesis, which is to research Nixon's reputation today, on the basis of the selected works. The sub-questions belonging to the main research question are the following:

- If any, what liberties did writers, playwrights and directors take with the known facts of the Watergate Affair and Richard Nixon's career?
- What characteristics do the selected works have in common in their description of Richard Nixon and the Watergate Affair?
- In what different genres has the Watergate Affair been recounted?
- How did these works influence the public opinion of Richard Nixon?²
- What is Richard Nixon's reputation today? Has it improved, and if so, why?

These sub-questions were written as a kind of memory aid, so as things to be kept in the back of the mind to help answer the main research question of this thesis. As the largest part of this thesis is built around different works of literature and film, those works will be discussed in the chapters ahead. Every chapter will discuss one or several works of popular culture, and the sub-questions will feature in these discussions too – as long as they are relevant for that specific work. In the conclusion the sample as a whole will be considered, and all the loose ends will be tied up together, so that eventually the main research question will be answered.

All of the works have been examined by way of a combination of close-reading and contextualisation. Close reading is understood here, in accordance with Martin Gray's *Dictionary of Literary Terms*, as 'the scrupulous and balanced critical examination of a text to extract its meaning and identify its effects'.³ The films discussed in this thesis are considered as texts too: they have been watched scrupulously, with attention to the lines, to details such as music, other sounds, facial

¹ The Watergate Affair: A shorthand definition, which focuses solely on the events, and the origin of the word, would be as follows: The cover-up of the Committee to Reelect the President's break-in, approved by President Nixon, at the Democratic Party Headquarters at the Watergate building in Washington D.C., and the subsequent revelation of other sensitive information, which ultimately led to President Nixon's resignation and the indictment of several of his closest advisers.

² Public Opinion: 'The opinions, views, or beliefs held by the general public on subjects of national interest or importance: *Public opinion says that politicians can never make the mistake of having an affair.*' Naturally, public opinion on someone as public as the President exists in the United States. Public opinion can be expressed in many different ways. The difference between *an* opinion and *public* opinion is that *an* opinion is specific, while *public* opinion is the general opinion. This general opinion is the prevalent way in a country to think about a certain topic. This opinion, however, is greatly influenced by the media, which of course makes it worthwhile to examine those media. 'Media' are television, film, the internet, newspapers, the radio, magazines, books and new media. *The Longman Dictionary of English Language and Culture* (Harlow: Pearson Education Limited; Third Edition, Second impression, 2006) 1116.

³ Martin Gray, *A dictionary of literary terms* (Beirut: York Press, 1992).

expressions, the way in which actors inhabit their character, and the language of the camera. To do all of the films justice the original (and legal) DVDs were used for this thesis, except for *Secret Honor*, which was watched on YouTube. Where directors have a very discernible style, as is the case with Alan J. Pakula (as a New Hollywood director) and Oliver Stone (as a Post-modernist of sorts) this has been taken into account as well. This idea of the director as the decisive creative force, with his own distinctive style, arose among French film critics in the early 1950s. 'Today we can say that at last the director writes in film', wrote André Bazin. 'The film maker is no longer the competitor of the painter and the playwright, he is, at last, the equal of the novelist.'⁴

Each work that will be discussed in this thesis will now be introduced briefly. First, however, a note on the selection as a whole. All of the works in the selection below are interesting of their own accord, but they are even more interesting taken together. The intention of this selection was that these works should be a fair representation of Nixon-related works. There are different genres of films (comedy, biopic, drama, etc), from different decades, some of them well-known, some less well-known. The number of novels is somewhat smaller than originally intended. While most works are critical of Nixon and his presidency, some works are obviously partisan and others are less so.

Philip Roth's *Our Gang* (1971) was published before the break-in at the Watergate building ever happened. Nevertheless, it is an interesting work of literature, because it somehow foreshadows the downfall of Richard Nixon, when nobody could have foreseen it. As the blurb on the cover of the original edition puts it, "Though steeped in the atmosphere of fantasy, and reminiscent of Keystone Cops slapstick and baggy-pants burlesque routines, *Our Gang* is conceived in indignation, a satirical vision of a debased national leadership speaking a language that, in Orwell's words, 'is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind.'"⁵

Being a political play, and consisting partly of quotations, Gore Vidal's *An Evening with Richard Nixon* (1972) is a rather peculiar work.⁶ The play, which will be discussed briefly in the chapter on *Burr*, is extremely critical of Richard Nixon, and of politics in general. George Washington, who is one of the four main characters in the play, represents history – which, the message is, will no doubt judge Richard Nixon.

Burr (1974) is quite different from Vidal's play, in that it is a historical novel, which does not deal directly with Richard Nixon, but is similar in its criticisms.⁷ *Burr* is a historical novel about Aaron Burr – that other villain of American history. Alexander Burr killed Alexander Hamilton, his most important rival, in a duel in 1804, in his last year of serving as Vice-President under Thomas Jefferson, who is clearly taken off his pedestal by Vidal. Towards the end of the book, a carefully selected set of parallels between Jefferson and Nixon appears, and at the same time Vidal criticizes Nixon. As Vidal writes in an epilogue to the novel, "Why a historical novel and not a history? To me, the attraction of the historical novel is that one can be as meticulous (or as careless!) as the historian and yet reserve the right not only to rearrange events but, most important, to attribute motive – something the historian ought never do."⁸ The novel appeared in 1974, and although it was a historical novel, it was very relevant to the political situation at that time.

All the President's Men (1974) recounts the Watergate Affair from the viewpoint of journalists Woodward and Bernstein of the *Washington Post*, who played an important role in unravelling the cover-up of the break-in at the Watergate Hotel.⁹ Two years later the film of the same title appeared.¹⁰ This film is easily the best-known and most often taught work of this list.

⁴ André Bazin, 'The evolution of the language of cinema,' in Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen *Film Theory and Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press 2009, 7th edition) 53.

⁵ Philip Roth, *Our gang (starring Tricky and his friends)* (London: Cape 1971).

⁶ Gore Vidal, *An evening with Richard Nixon* (New York: Random House, 1972).

⁷ Gore Vidal, *Burr* (New York: Granada Publishers 1974) 575.

⁸ Vidal, *Burr*, 575.

⁹ Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward, *All the President's Men* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974).

¹⁰ *All the President's Men*, dir. Allen J. Pakula. (1976; Distributed by Warner Home Video 2006 DVD).

In Robert Altman's film *Secret Honor* (1984) Nixon locks himself up in his New York study to dictate his version of the Watergate Affair and his resignation to a tape-recorder.¹¹ The film is an intriguing one-man show with a fairly positive view of President Nixon. It gives interesting psychological insights, and speculates about the true causes of the Watergate Affair.

A biopic that follows Nixon from his early youth to his departure from the White House in July 1974 and that touches on all the important events of Nixon's political life is Oliver Stone's *Nixon* (1995).¹² The film is a character study of Nixon, but also includes some speculation and conspiracy theory, typical for Oliver Stone. J. Edgar Hoover is depicted as a homosexual, Nixon has connections with Texan oil tycoons, and Nixon feels responsible for John F. Kennedy's death, and this is somehow connected to the Bay of Pigs Invasion. Nixon's downfall, which has Shakespearian overtones, is drawn out over a three hours in this film.

Another film, Niels Mueller's *The Assassination of Richard Nixon* (2005) is based on the true story of a man who wanted to end his misery by killing Richard Nixon.¹³ He gets completely obsessed with Nixon and blames him for everything that has gone astray in his own life, and in America. His only ally is composer Leonard Bernstein, to whom he dictates audio-messages, to be sent to him after the assassination. The film "exposes the dark side of the American dream and the plight of those who refuse to fall under its spell."¹⁴

Peter Morgan's play *Frost/Nixon* (2006), which preceded the film, pairs together two people who are not much alike: David Frost, a British talk-show host who finally wants to be taken seriously, and Richard Nixon, who sees the interviews as a chance to redeem himself.¹⁵ The oppositions between these men drive the play. The film *Frost/Nixon* (2008) directed by Ron Howard, the most recent work of this selection, humanizes Nixon: it shows his flaws as well as his strengths, and moreover, shows the person that he was – a disciplined, clever politician, but also a somewhat shy, awkward, but friendly family-man.¹⁶

Naturally, a great many non-fiction books have been written about Nixon too, and some of them Nixon wrote himself. His successes in foreign policy spawned quite a lot of books, as did the Watergate Affair; there is no shortage of biographies about him either. Because Nixon had such a long political career, some of the works are lengthy, too. Stephen E. Ambrose wrote a biography in three parts: *Nixon: The Education of a Politician 1913-1962* (1987), *Nixon: The Triumph of a Politician 1962-1972* (1989) and *Nixon: Ruin and Recovery 1973-1990* (1991), all published by Simon & Schuster.¹⁷ These three parts offer minutely detailed information concerning all aspects of Nixon's life. They are relatively neutral and fair in their assessment of Nixon's career and therefore they have been used in many cases as a first reference point in writing this thesis. There are many more biographies, but not all of them were available for use here. A few other notable Nixon biographies are: *Richard Nixon: The Shaping of his Character* (1981) by Fawn M. Brodie, which has a psychoanalytic angle; *Richard Milhous Nixon: The Rise of an American Politician* (1991) by Roger Morris; *President Nixon: Alone in the White House*, *Richard M. Nixon: The American President Series* (2002) by well-known *New York Times* political correspondent Elizabeth Drew; and *Richard M. Nixon: A Life in Full* (2007) by Conrad Black.¹⁸

¹¹ *Secret Honor*, dir. Robert Altman. (1984, Sandcastle 5 Production).

¹² *Nixon*, dir. Oliver Stone (1996; distributed by Entertainment in Video, DVD).

¹³ *The assassination of Richard Nixon*, dir. Niels Mueller (2004; Metrodome Distribution Ltd., 2005 DVD).

¹⁴ *The assassination of Richard Nixon*, dir. by Niels Mueller (2004; Metrodome Distribution Ltd., 2005 DVD).

¹⁵ Peter Morgan, *Frost/Nixon* (New York: Dramatist Play Service, 2009).

¹⁶ *Frost/Nixon*, dir. Ron Howard (Universal, 2008).

¹⁷ Stephen E. Ambrose, *Nixon: The education of a politician 1913-1962* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987);

Stephen E. Ambrose, *Nixon: The triumph of a politician 1962-1972* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989);

Stephen E. Ambrose, *Nixon: Ruin and recovery 1973-1990* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991).

¹⁸ Fawn M. Brodie, *Richard Nixon, the shaping of his character*. (New York: Norton, 1981); Roger Morris, *Richard Milhous Nixon: The rise of an American politician* (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1991); Richard Reeves, *President Nixon: Alone in the White House* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002); Elizabeth Drew, *Richard Nixon: The American President series* (New York: Times Books, 2007); Conrad Black, *Richard M. Nixon – A life in full* (New York: Public Affairs, 2007).

Apart from surveys of Nixon's life, there are works which discuss parts of his career, such as *The Contender: Richard Nixon: The Congress Years 1946 to 1952* (1999) by Irwin F. Gellman, about Nixon's early political career; *Ike and Dick: Portrait of a Strange Political Marriage* (2013) by Jeffrey Frank, about the relationship between the President and Vice-President; various books about the 1960 presidential election, for example *Kennedy vs. Nixon: The Presidential Election of 1960* (2010); Theodore H. White's classic *The Making of the President 1960* (1961); and *Kennedy & Nixon: The Rivalry that Shaped Postwar America* by Christopher J. Matthews (1996).¹⁹ Then, there are assessments of Nixon's Presidency, such as *The Presidency of Richard Nixon* (1999) and oral history accounts, such as *The Nixon Presidency* (1987) by Kenneth W. Thompson and *The Nixon Presidency: An Oral History of the Era* (2003) by Deborah and Gerald Strober.²⁰ Several books deal explicitly with Nixon's foreign policy; a good book is William Bundy's *A Tangled Web: The Making of Foreign Policy in the Nixon Presidency* (1998).²¹ Naturally, there are many books dealing with the Watergate Affair. Almost all of the participants, such as H.R. Haldeman, Henry Kissinger and Judge John Sirica, have by now written a book about the affair that sent some officials and politicians to jail. Historians and political scientists wrote books about the affair almost immediately after it was revealed. Some are extremely negative about Nixon, such as Jonathan Schell's *The Time of Illusion* (1975), but later books have dealt with the affair more neutrally, such as Fred Emery in *Watergate: The Corruption of American Politics and the Fall of Richard Nixon* (1994), a very handy reference book.²² There are also books about Nixon's fall from grace and subsequent re-establishment, such as *Exile: The Unquiet Oblivion of Richard Nixon* (1984) by Robert Sam Anderson.²³ Last of all, Nixon himself was a prolific writer too. His first book *Six Crises* (1962) was a best-seller, and his memoirs *RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (1978) were a success too, as well as an indispensable source for Nixon scholars.²⁴

Recently, some cultural studies about Nixon have appeared, such as David Greenberg's *Nixon's Shadow: The History of an Image* (2003) and Daniel Frick's *Reinventing Richard Nixon* (2008).²⁵ Frick's book has been very helpful and Greenberg's book would have been too, if it had been more easily available. Both books give a cultural history of Nixon, or a 'history of his image,' which is effectively the same. Frick's book is remarkable for its wide scope: it discusses fiction, film, theatre, pop songs and television shows and includes illustrations of all kinds of Nixon paraphernalia, such as political cartoons and campaign memorabilia. Frick gives a great deal of attention to the way in which perceptions of Nixon changed over time. Along the way, he gives valuable insights into the American national psyche. Frick, however, often glosses over works rather quickly. Sometimes, for instance when writing about the play *Frost/Nixon* and when writing about *All the President's Men*, he provides one or two telling details, but he does not examine the works in great depth. Frick only devotes half a page to *All the President's Men*, while this thesis

¹⁹ Irwin Gellman, *The Contender: Richard Nixon the Congress years, 1946 to 1952* (New York: The Free Press, 1999); Jeffrey Frank, *Ike and Dick: Portrait of a strange political marriage* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2013); Edmun F. Kallina Jr., *Kennedy v. Nixon: The election of 1960* (Gainesville: University Press Florida, 2010); Theodore H. White, *The making of the President, 1960* (New York: Atheneum Publishers, 1961); Christopher J. Matthews, *Kennedy & Nixon: The rivalry that shaped postwar America* (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1996).

²⁰ Melvin Small, *The presidency of Richard Nixon* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1999); Kenneth W. Thompson, *The Nixon presidency* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1987); Deborah Hart Strober and Gerald S. Strober *The Nixon Presidency: An Oral History of the Era* (Dulles: Potomac, 2003).

²¹ William Bundy, *A tangled web: the making of foreign policy in the Nixon Presidency* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998).

²² Jonathan Schell, *The time of illusion* (New York: Knopf, 1975); Fred Emery, *Watergate: The corruption of American politics and the fall of Richard Nixon* (New York: Times Books, 1994).

²³ Robert Sam Anderson, *Exile: The unquiet oblivion of Richard Nixon* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984).

²⁴ Richard M. Nixon, *Six Crises* (New York: Doubleday, 1962; Richard M. Nixon, *RN: the memoirs of Richard Nixon* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1978).

²⁵ David Greenberg, *Nixon's shadow: The history of an image* (New York, W.W. Norton & Company, 2003); Daniel Frick, *Reinventing Richard Nixon: A cultural history of an American obsession* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2008).

specifically addresses the Watergate Affair and devotes at least half a chapter to *All the President's Men*. All in all the book has functioned mostly as a starting point for further exploration and in order to explain certain attitudes towards Nixon. Furthermore, the extensive 30 page bibliography included in the book was a very helpful tool in locating works of popular culture with Nixon as their subject.

As one might have surmised from the above, the debates in this very large body of Nixon-related works are not easily summarised. What one needs to keep in mind is that there are different sides in the debates. There are partisan and bipartisan members of the debate, those who ran against Nixon (Stevenson, Humphrey), ex-colleagues who turned against Nixon, campaign leaders, friends, Liberals, journalists, lawyers, and others. A great many people have somehow had a part in Nixon's career, or in the Watergate Affair, and so the discourse on Nixon is large and complicated. Now, almost 40 years after the fact, and almost 20 years after Nixon's death, slowly a consensus starts to form on Nixon. But questions concerning Nixon and Watergate still remain: how much is Nixon to blame for Watergate? To what extent was Watergate the outcome of an ongoing historical development – the accumulation of Presidential power? What does Nixon's character have to do with the Watergate Affair? Was he, all in all, a great politician? Did he have, at least, elements of greatness? And how liberal was Richard Nixon, or how conservative? Another fascinating topic is the identity of Deep Throat (Mark Felt), who served as a secret and highly valuable source of information to Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein when they were reporting the Watergate Affair for the *Washington Post*. In 2006, after he had revealed that he was Deep Throat to *Vanity Fair*, Felt's memoir *The FBI Pyramid: From the Inside* (1979) was reissued and updated with a new chapter.²⁶ The questions above, and a myriad of other questions, keep historians, journalists and political scientists busy up until this day, and produce a steady flow of scholarly work. New publications continue to appear, such as *Ike and Dick: Portrait of a Strange Political Marriage*, which appeared last February, and Nixon continues to capture the American imagination.

²⁶ W. Mark Felt, *The FBI pyramid: From the inside* (New York: Putnam, 1979); W. Mark Felt, *A G-Man's life: The FBI, being 'Deep Throat', and the struggle for honor in Washington* (New York: Public Affairs, 2006).

Chapter 1: Historical context- The political career of Richard Nixon and the Watergate Affair

In this chapter some of the highs and lows of Richard Nixon's political career will be discussed. This is an essential part of this thesis, because while analyzing the works one needs to have a clear idea of their historical context. Only a simple, yet thorough, close-reading of the works would not suffice, because 'national amnesia' of certain events, to speak with Gore Vidal, sometimes plays tricks upon the memory, and this kind of amnesia, no doubt, could have found its way into the works that are to be discussed.¹ While one does not have to be a Harvard professor to know that Edward Kennedy never campaigned as 'the Hero of Chappaquiddick', as Vidal mockingly predicted, thoroughly researched background information is obligatory if one does not want to fall in such traps.² Also, as stated in the Introduction, one of the goals of this thesis is to establish Richard Nixon's popular reputation today, which of course is inextricably bound to his political life.

By examining the ways in which Nixon solved important crises, such as the Hiss Affair or the Funds Crises, one not only gets to know the necessary historical backgrounds, but one also learns a great deal about his character. Nixon would have made a great tragic hero: he had obvious character flaws, but he also had immense intellectual capabilities, and could both be very vindictive and mean, and very thoughtful and kind. In short, he was a man of great contradictions – which is what makes him interesting.

Special attention will be paid to political events or situations that were somehow echoed by or were precursors to the Watergate Affair. The Hiss Case was a governmental cover-up too, but it had Nixon on the other side of the fence, trying to unravel the case. Another example of a Watergate echo is the way in which Nixon, and everyone else in the White House, reacted to Daniel Ellsberg's leaking of the Pentagon Papers to the *New York Times*. Lastly, special attention will be given to how the most important events of Nixon's career influenced his reputation as a politician, either positively or negatively, for example the funds crisis of 1952, which resulted in the Checkers Speech, his visit to South-America as a Vice-President, and the curious jigsaw relationship between the reputation of Richard Nixon and that of Alger Hiss.

As a young congressman, Nixon was eager to prove himself. After entering the House of Representatives, he joined two House committees: The Education and Labour Committee, and HUAC, or the House Committee on Unamerican Activities.³ According to Stephen A. Ambrose Nixon had a moderating influence on the committee. Although Nixon was convinced that communism in the USA was a pressing problem, he did not believe in aggressive red-baiting.⁴ The fear that the Soviet Union had the capability and the inclination to launch attacks on the United States in the late 1940s and 1950s not only led to the development of the atom and hydrogen bombs in the West, but also to the fear that communists were working to disintegrate American society from within. The fact that physicist Klaus Fuchs and State Department official Alger Hiss were both routed out of government circles for being Soviets spies (Hiss was exposed in the famous trial of 1949, Fuchs in 1950) and the fact that Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were executed in 1953 on conspiracy charges (without full substantiation) are both indications of the political paranoia which grew steadily after 1946.⁵

The Hiss Case made Nixon a very well-known politician out. It showcased Nixon's talents perfectly. In August 1948 Elizabeth Bentley, former US Communist Party (CP) courier, was questioned by the committee. Bentley named names, including a few prominent government aides,

¹ Gore Vidal, *An evening with Richard Nixon* (New York: Random House, 1972), x.

² Vidal, *An evening with Richard Nixon*, x.

³ Stephen A. Ambrose, *Nixon: The education of a politician 1913-1962* (New York: Simon and Schuster 1987) 143.

⁴ Ambrose, *Nixon 1913-1962*, 154.

⁵ Martin Halliwell, *American culture in the 1950s* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press 2007) 2.

first mentioned publicly at her HUAC appearance and not in earlier congressional testimony.⁶ Bentley, as other ex-communists had done during and after the Second World War, had come to the FBI voluntarily to fight against communism and against Soviet Russia. For many Americans communism had lost its innocence and its intellectual appeal, and as a result some ex-communists 'converted' and became strongly anti-communist. The committee heard another person to confirm Bentley's story. This man, Whittaker Chambers, forty-seven years old, and with an unimpressive appearance, subsequently named Alger Hiss as a member of the American Communist Party, and as an agent for the USSR.⁷ Alger Hiss was a Harvard-trained lawyer who had clerked for Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, had served Roosevelt during the New Deal era and had later, as a State Department Official, presided over the inaugural meeting of the United Nations.⁸ At the time of the accusations against him Hiss was president of the Carnegie Endowment.⁹ He was a favourite of the liberal, east-coast establishment, and his equally well-known liberal colleagues, such as John Foster Dulles and Dean Acheson, initially defended Hiss.¹⁰ Even the President, Harry S. Truman, supported Hiss, and denounced HUAC's actions as a 'red herring' used by the Republicans to tarnish his New Deal Liberalism, and called them 'headline hunters not interested in prosecutions.'¹¹ Truman's statement infuriated Nixon, and motivated him to follow through on Hiss, but of course Nixon also had in mind the upcoming elections: 'If there turned out to be substance to Chambers's charges, Truman would be terribly embarrassed, and ordinarily this possibility alone might have spurred the Republicans on in an election year', he wrote.¹²

The outcome of the case was as follows: First of all, Alger Hiss was accused of perjury, in that he had claimed not to know Whittaker Chambers, while there was plenty of proof that he had. This much was clear early on in the trial. Furthermore, he had perjured in saying that he had not been a member of the American Communist Party, and had not engaged in espionage. The latter became apparent when Chambers produced the 'pumpkin papers' – photocopies of material which Hiss had stolen from the State Department, and had passed on to the Soviet Union. In the process, however, Chambers had also perjured because he had told HUAC that he had never engaged in espionage, and neither had the CP ring that Hiss had belonged to as a government official.¹³ For a short while, it even looked as if Hiss would walk free, and Chambers would go to prison, and Nixon's political career effectively would be over. To prevent this, Nixon mobilized public opinion: During one of the hearings, in company of the the press, Nixon claimed that by planning to indict Chambers instead of Hiss the Administration was trying to silence the committee.¹⁴

In short, what the government was trying to do, was to cover it all up. After all, Chambers had already told his story to the FBI before: In 1939, two days after the Hitler-Stalin pact, he had told the authorities in the United States government what he knew about communist infiltration.¹⁵ One would have thought that during a time in which Europe was at war, the Roosevelt government should have looked into that. Chambers had even repeated his story to the FBI in 1943, when the U.S. had become involved with the war too, and in 1945. Still the government never did anything to find out if indeed there was communist infiltration in the American government.¹⁶ Furthermore, J. Edgar Hoover had flooded the Truman Administration with memos detailing Bentley's allegations of widespread Soviet espionage, but the Administration had taken no action, perhaps because the

⁶ Allen Weinstein, *Perjury: The Hiss-Chambers case* (New York: Random House 1997) 4.

⁷ Weinstein, *Perjury*, 5.

⁸ Paul S. Boyer et al., *The enduring vision: A history of the American people*. (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company 2008, sixth edition) 820.

⁹ Ambrose, *Nixon 1913-1962*, 170.

¹⁰ Ibidem.

¹¹ Boyer et al., *The enduring vision*, 821; Ambrose, *Nixon 1913-1962*, 195.

¹² Richard M. Nixon, *RN: The memoirs of Richard Nixon* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap 1978) 56.

¹³ Ambrose, *Nixon 1913-1962*, 189.

¹⁴ Ibidem, 192,194

¹⁵ Ibidem, 169.

¹⁶ Ibidem, 170.

informant offered no corroboration for her story.¹⁷ The reason why the Truman Administration did not act after the War must surely have been for fear of embarrassing the government.

The relevance of the Hiss Case to this thesis is twofold: first of all the case was a major breakthrough for Nixon himself. It made him famous and well-respected. It showed his zest for hard work, his perseverance, his skills as a lawyer, and most of all, his political abilities. It also helped to pave the way for his position as vice-president under Eisenhower. The Hiss Case was also Nixon's baptism of fire in crisis management, as he described in great detail in the first chapter of his book *Six Crises*.¹⁸ However, Nixon was somewhat bitter about the case: 'The Hiss Case brought me national fame. But it also left a residue of hatred and hostility toward me – not only among the Communists but also among substantial segments of the press and the intellectual community' – a hostility which remains even today, ten years after Hiss's conviction was upheld by the United States Supreme Court.¹⁹ The persistent disbelief of some of Hiss's former colleagues, however, was understandable, since what HUAC considered as definite proof of his guilt, was tied to a typewriter (which exactly matched the typewriter which typed the copies of the secret documents) and the donation, via an intermediary, of Hiss's old car to the Communist Party, as well as testimonies of various people – none of whom had directly witnessed Hiss's crimes.

Second of all, the Hiss Case relates to the Watergate Affair, in that in both cases Nixon was one of the main players, and in that the government tried to cover up sensitive information. Allen Weinstein, writer of *Perjury: The Hiss-Chambers Case*, very interestingly discusses the Watergate Affair in conjunction with the Hiss Case, and discusses whether people thought Hiss guilty or not *after* Watergate. Throughout his life Hiss maintained that he was innocent. According to Weinstein, public opinion on Hiss started to change after Watergate, due to the parallels in the two cases. People, mostly ill-informed and of the new generation, saw Hiss as Nixon's 'first victim' in a long train of victims. To make Nixon, their favourite culprit, look even more bad, they made Hiss look better. Time and time again Hiss or his supporters invented new ways to ascertain Hiss's innocence, and Hiss himself was very skilful in making this work his way. Hiss also compared himself to other victims of, arguably, unfair, political trials, such as Daniel Ellsberg, and, in fact, deemed himself their 'ancestor'.²⁰ Of course, none of this did Nixon's reputation any good. During the 1950s Nixon's handling of the Hiss Case mostly worked in his favour, although he alienated some liberal politicians and journalists. After Watergate, when Nixon was despised, Alger Hiss neatly capitalized on this. It took a long time before Nixon was rehabilitated, and it took until 1993 to find cables of the National Security Agency of Hungary that indicated that Alger Hiss was the Soviet agent 'Ales', although even that did not convince some of Hiss's supporters.

Out of the thousands of speeches that Nixon held during his life, the speech that is now generally called the 'Checkers Speech' is one of the most famous. The speech had mostly positive, but also some negative effects on Nixon's career. Up until the televised election debates between Kennedy and Nixon in 1960 the audience that watched the Checkers Speech was the largest television audience: almost 60 million people, out of a total population of 157,5 million.²¹ The occasion for the speech was that Nixon and his campaign-manager Murray Chotiner had set up a fund for expenses such as travel, printing and the mailing of speeches and extra trips to California, where Nixon had his voting base, because Nixon's senatorial salary of \$15,000 per annum did not suffice.²² The funds were meant for political activities, as opposed to official government business. The fund had been

¹⁷ Weinstein, *Perjury*, 4.

¹⁸ Richard M. Nixon *Six crises* (New York: Warner 1979) 1-84.

¹⁹ Richard M. Nixon, *Six crises*, 81.

²⁰ Weinstein, *Perjury*, 550-551.

²¹ R.W. Rosenfeld, 'A case study in speech criticism: The Nixon-Truman analog', *Speech Monographs* 35.4

(1968)436; US Census Bureau 'United States population: from 1900' via Demographia

<<http://www.demographia.com/db-uspop1900.htm>>; Fawn M. Brodie, *Richard Nixon, the shaping of his character* (New York: Norton 1981) 271.

²² Brodie, *Richard Nixon*, 273-274.

carefully established, limiting contributions to individuals, not corporations, and to a maximum of \$500, so that no one would be accused of trying to buy special favours.²³ In the two years in which the fund had existed up until it came to light, Nixon and his team had fund-raised a total amount of \$18.235. Dana Smith, a chartered accountant from Pasadena, was the appointed trustee of the fund.²⁴ Roughly a month before the elections the press got hold of Nixon's fund. The Democrats denounced the fund with everything they had, because it was election time. Many of Nixon's fellow Republicans also disapproved of the fund. 'The Senator's initial defence – that other Senators cut similar corners and that he used the money to save the taxpayers from unnecessary expenses – is no defence at all,' wrote the generally leftist *Washington Post* on September 19 in an editorial titled 'Nixon Should Withdraw.' 'He needs to be reminded that he is working for the taxpayers. Obviously they do not wish to have part of his expenses paid by anonymous friends who might, as a result, lay first claim to his loyalty.'²⁵ Nixon's main argument was that he was saving the taxpayers money – and what more could they want? 'However, it was not a very strong argument. No one looking seriously at the flow of funds, however kept separate of Nixon's bank account, could deny that the thousand dollars a month increased his standard of living. Nixon himself indiscreetly admitted to columnist Peter Edson that had it not been for the fund he could not have purchased his new home in Washington.'²⁶ Furthermore, the *Post* writes: 'His defence of gift-taking is utterly out of keeping with the Republican pledge of a 'top-to-bottom' clean-up and of "woodshed honesty."' According to the editorial – an opinion shared by many – Nixon's conduct was not befitting for a campaign in which the main domestic issue of the president-to-be was that 'new leadership was needed to return high moral standards to government', in short, that Washington needed to be cleaned up.²⁷ Such a fund as Nixon had, no matter how good and honest his intentions seemed to be, was against the rules, and therefore he should withdraw, people thought. Although he did not make it easily noticeable, he did benefit from the fund.

While everybody criticized Nixon, Eisenhower remained silent. After all, if he spoke out too early against Nixon this could turn against him.²⁸ Of course Nixon defended himself vigorously. Nixon and his team thought of going on television, and Thomas E. Dewey also advised him to do so: 'I think you ought to go on television,' he said. 'I don't think Eisenhower *should* make this decision. Make the American people do it.'²⁹ And so the Republican National Committee and the Senatorial and Congressional Campaign Committees put up \$75.000 for half an hour of television time, and Nixon could have his say.

The speech was a great success. Nixon used parts of speeches he had held on the subject in the days preceding the broadcast. Most of the arguments he used have already been stated above. There was, however, one new element to his speech: Checkers. Having in mind F.D. Roosevelt's mention of his dog Fala in one of his speeches, Nixon decided to use the dog, which he had gotten as a present from a supporter in Texas, to muster up more sympathy for himself.³⁰

One other thing I probably should tell you, because if I don't they'll probably be saying this about me, too. We did get something, a gift, after the election. A man down in Texas heard Pat on the radio mention the fact that our two youngsters would like to have a dog. And believe it or not, the day before we left on this campaign trip we got a message from Union Station in Baltimore, saying they had a package for us. We went down to get it. You know what it was? It was a little cocker spaniel dog in a crate that he'd sent all the way from Texas, black and white, spotted. And our little girl Tricia, the six year old, named it

²³ Nixon, *Six crises*, 87.

²⁴ Nixon, *RN: the memoirs*, 92.

²⁵ Editorial: "Nixon should withdraw". *The Washington Post* (20 September 1952) via ProQuest Historical Newspapers Database <<http://search.proquest.com>>.

²⁶ Brodie, *Richard Nixon*, 280.

²⁷ Editorial: "Nixon should withdraw". *The Washington Post*.

²⁸ Nixon, *RN: the memoirs*, 97

²⁹ Ibidem.

³⁰ Ambrose, *Nixon 1913-1962*, 285.

“Checkers.” And you know, the kids, like all kids, love the dog, and I just want to say this, right now, that regardless of what they say bout it, we’re gonna keep it.³¹

Some people thought the lines immensely corny, and some thought them rather brilliant, but, more importantly, the speech worked. Nixon's speech *moved* people. It even moved Mamie Eisenhower to tears, according to Nixon's memoirs.³² The day after the speech, many Republicans, including Senators Mundt, Knowland and Ives, congratulated Nixon on his performance. The Democrats were not so positive, of course. Democratic Senator Brent Spence of Kentucky said: 'A confession and avoidance. He pleaded poverty. Lots of us are poor. I never found it necessary to get outside income of any kind.'³³ It took a few more days for Eisenhower to definitely accept his running mate back on the ticket (although, technically Nixon had never been off the ticket) and a few more weeks before Eisenhower and Nixon won the elections with a whopping majority of 442 to 89 electoral votes.

The funds crisis, however, just like the Hiss Case, would haunt Nixon during the rest of his career. Despite the flood of telegrams, a majority in the audience found the speech objectionable. Democrats liked to tease Nixon with the speech, and the experience of having to bear his financial affairs for all of the country to hear, against his wife's wishes, was painful too.³⁴ Finally, what people remembered of the speech was not Nixon's political integrity, not his ideals, and neither what he stood for, but *his dog*.³⁵ And so, as in the Hiss Case, the outcome of the funds crisis was overwhelmingly positive in the short run; after all Nixon did not have to resign and became Vice-President, as planned. In the long run, however, the funds crisis and the Checkers Speech also did irreparable political damage.

In 1958, in his sixth year as Vice-President, it was decided that Nixon should make a trip to Latin America to represent the United States at the inauguration of Arturo Frondizi, the newly elected president of Argentina.³⁶ Both Eisenhower and Nixon thought that foreign aid was an integral part of the worldwide defence against communism. To start in Latin America would be the most logical, because that was the part of the Third World closest to the United States.³⁷ From a Cold War perspective poor countries were an easy target for the Communists, because Communism promised equality, and, more importantly, food and work for everybody. The only way to prevent these countries from 'going red' was to help them. Otherwise, Eisenhower, Nixon, and State Secretary John Foster Dulles thought, the danger was that the industrial democracies would not survive 'if the Russians got control of the Middle East, the uranium of Africa and many of the other raw materials that were so crucial to Western industry and available only in the Third World.'³⁸ In short, foreign aid to third world countries was necessary, or else they would all turn communist and who knew what would happen then? The United States could lose the Cold War. However, not everybody in Congress agreed with the Administration, so every year they had great difficulties in getting the legislation for foreign aid to pass.³⁹

The State Department saw Nixon's trip to Argentina as an opportunity to strengthen ties with Latin America and changed the trip into a two-and-a-half-week tour of Latin America.⁴⁰ Nixon toured Uruguay, Argentina, Paraguay, Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador, Colombia and Venezuela. His visit to the latter was a disaster. Nixon and his wife were “subjected to a rain of spittle” when they entered

³¹ Richard M. Nixon 'Checkers speech' (23 September 1952) <www.americanrhetoric.com>.

³² Nixon, *RN: the Memoirs*, 105.

³³ *The New York Times*. 'Nixon replies tax phone, wire lines – Most G.O.P. leaders voice approval, but Gabrielson is critical, Lodge silent' (24 September 1952) via ProQuest Historical Newspapers Database <<http://search.proquest.com>>.

³⁴ Nixon, *Six crises*, 150.

³⁵ Ambrose, *Nixon 1913-1962*, 294.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, 461.

³⁷ *Ibidem*, 460.

³⁸ *Ibidem*, 461.

³⁹ *Ibidem*, 459.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, 462.

Caracas airport, and later on the trip his car was attacked by furious pro-communist mobs who shouted 'Muera Nixon' (kill Nixon), throwing big rocks at the windows of the car, and attempting to roll over the car.⁴¹ All in all it was a harrowing experience for the Nixons and their delegation. While Nixon had provoked mobs in at least one instant during the trip (in Lima), the violence directed against him in Caracas was not at all his fault. Stephen Ambrose writes: 'What did happen was quite bizarre, without precedent, unique in the annals of international relations.'⁴² By all accounts the Nixons bore the violence remarkably well. The mob, however, did have some reasons to be angry. For a long time, the American government had supported the various corrupt dictators in Latin America, including Perez Jimenez, who reigned from 1952 until he was overthrown in 1958 by a coalition including the Venezuelan Communist Party. After all, during the Cold War corrupt dictatorships were still better than communist states, for both ideological and economic reasons.

The country rallied behind Nixon, and he and Pat were given a very warm welcome when they came back to Washington. Not only American newspapers wrote about the incident, but the *Irish Times* for example also reported it.⁴³ Mr and Mrs Nixon were praised by everybody for their brave conduct. However, not soon after they were back in Washington, some journalists and politicians began pointing out some of the flaws in Nixon's conduct, and wondered out loud whether 'Adlai E. Stevenson, or some other prominent Democrat would have received that kind of treatment on a similar South American tour,' and joked that 'Jack Kennedy ought to demand equal time in Venezuela.'⁴⁴ After all, election time was rapidly closing in. Democrats in both houses started lining up in support of full-scale investigations of the Administration's conduct of Latin-American policies. They also wanted to know whether or not the Central Intelligence Agency and diplomatic outposts alerted the Nixons to the dangers awaiting them. They also wondered how much of the abuse was aimed at Nixon personally, and how much of it was aimed at Nixon as a representative of the United States, and all that it stood for.⁴⁵

Another somewhat futile attempt at improving international relations, but a successful attempt to better his own image, was Nixon's 1959 visit to Moscow to attend the opening of the American National Exhibit in Moscow, on July 24, 1959.⁴⁶ Earlier that year, there had been a similar scientific exposition of the Russians in New York, where Nixon had spoken at the opening too. This enabled him to ask Abbott Washburn, in charge of the exhibition in Moscow, if he could speak there also. It was mostly an excuse for Nixon to go to Russia, and to meet with Nikita Khrushchev, the Soviet Leader, as Democratic candidates Hubert Humphry and Adlai Stevenson had done before Nixon.⁴⁷

Nevertheless, it was a very exciting trip, which yielded one of the most famous moments of the Cold War: the so-called 'Kitchen debate'. After their first meeting, Khrushchev and Nixon went to see the American Exhibition, which was to be opened in the evening. 'One of the first displays we came to,' Nixon writes, 'was a model television studio, and a young engineer asked if we would like to try out a new color television taping system by recording that could be played back during the Exhibition.'⁴⁸ Thereafter followed a confrontation of sorts that ended in Khrushchev shouting: 'If I don't know everything, you don't know anything about communism, except fear of it!' Before that, he boasted that in seven years the Soviet Union would be on the same economic level with the United States. 'When we catch up with you, in passing you by, we will wave to you!' waving his

⁴¹ Brodie, *Richard Nixon*, 370-371; Ambrose, *Nixon 1913-1962*, 472-477.

⁴² Ambrose. *Nixon 1913-1962*, 473.

⁴³ "Was Mr Nixon's tour advisable? Washington cheers him and begins to inquire. *The Manchester Guardian* (16 May 1958) via ProQuest Historical Newspapers Database <<http://search.proquest.com>>

⁴⁴ C. Robert Albright, "Big boost is seen for Nixon stock" *The Washington Post and Times Herald* (16 May 1958) via ProQuest Historical Newspapers Database <<http://search.proquest.com>>

⁴⁵ Ibidem.

⁴⁶ Boyer et al., *The Enduring Vision*, 836.

⁴⁷ Brodie, *Richard Nixon*, 380-381.

⁴⁸ Nixon, *RN: the memoirs*, 208.

hand in jest.⁴⁹ This footage was later broadcast on TV in the United States.⁵⁰ After this Khrushchev and Nixon proceeded to a model of a typical American middle-class kitchen (hence the *kitchen* debate) – modern, and with all kinds of amenities – and continued their debate. This part of the trip was not actually televised, but reported by all major American newspapers and magazines such as *Life* and *Newsweek*.⁵¹ Fawn M. Brodie quotes from *Newsweek*: 'It was first a contest of men. Here was Dick Nixon, young (46), slender, eager – the son of a California grocer, an American man of success. Opposing him was Khrushchev, ageing (65), short, bull-strong – the son of a peasant, ex-coalminer, successor to Stalin. It was, too, a contest of nations ... their secret deadly talks could change the course of history.'⁵² And indeed, it was a historical moment: surrounded by American kitchen gadgets the two men played ideological hardball. Both men, and both nations, showed their teeth, and Khrushchev literally said to Nixon, and to the United States, 'we can beat you.'⁵³ Furthermore, Nixon held a speech for the Russian radio and television which was also printed in the *Pravda* and *Izvestia*, two of the most important Soviet newspapers. That was unprecedented too. On coming back, Nixon was widely praised for 'standing up to Khrushchev'.⁵⁴ All of this favourable publicity was splendid for Nixon, who wanted to show the American public that he had accomplishments of his own apart from the experience he had gained as Vice-President. After all the elections were coming closer. The diplomatic results of the trip, however, were questionable, as no agreements of any kind had been reached, since Eisenhower had told Nixon not to interfere and had reminded Nixon that he was 'not a normal part of the negotiating machinery.'⁵⁵

In 1960 Nixon was almost where he wanted to be – not Vice-President, but President of the United States. But he had yet to win the elections. He was the more experienced candidate, and yet John F. Kennedy won by an inch, by a mere 113,000 votes.⁵⁶ From the perspective of popular culture these elections were important because they featured the first televised debates between presidential candidates in history, and because Nixon's opponent was to become an American icon after his assassination. For Nixon personally, the outcome of the election was both a political and a personal disaster, as it left a big dent in his self-esteem.

There were several reasons for Nixon's defeat. First of all there was his campaign style. Ambrose writes that during the 1960 campaign, Nixon would not take anybody's advice, no matter if it were a volunteer or President Eisenhower himself. Ambrose suggests that this might have influenced Eisenhower, who never fully endorsed Nixon.⁵⁷ He also had a frantic schedule – even more frantic than normal – which exhausted both himself and his staff.⁵⁸ And while there is nothing wrong with trying to campaign one's hardest, it is less wise to do so when it affects a politician's appearance. Then, there was the choice of the running-mates. Kennedy famously chose Lyndon Baines Johnson, a tough politician from Texas. Johnson was taken aboard to capture the South. Nixon chose Henry Cabot Lodge Jr., UN ambassador, popular on the East Coast, popular among both liberal and conservative members of the Republican Party, and well-respected – which Johnson was not.⁵⁹ Johnson could win those votes that Kennedy would never be able to win, and vice versa. From a strategic viewpoint Kennedy's choice of Johnson was a brilliant move. Apart from the choice of running-mates, there was another issue: religion. John F. Kennedy was a third-generation

⁴⁹ Brodie, *Richard Nixon*, 384.

⁵⁰ Ambrose, *Nixon 1913-1962*, 523.

⁵¹ Brodie, *Richard Nixon*, 385.

⁵² Ibidem.

⁵³ Ambrose, *Nixon 1913-1962*, 524-525.

⁵⁴ Nixon, *RN: the memoirs*, 213.

⁵⁵ Ambrose, *Nixon 1913-1962*, 520.

⁵⁶ Fred Emery, *Watergate: the corruption of American politics and the fall of Richard Nixon* (New York: Times Books 1994) 8.

⁵⁷ Ambrose, *Nixon 1913-1962*, 556-557, 559.

⁵⁸ Ibidem, 556-557.

⁵⁹ Ibidem, 553-554.

Irish immigrant, and therefore a Catholic. Not since Al Smith, in 1928, had there been a Catholic candidate.⁶⁰ Would religious prejudices play a role? Political commentators, such as Stewart Alsop, guessed that Kennedy's Catholicism was an important factor. Alsop predicted that if Kennedy managed to gain 70% of the votes of the largest minorities (Jews, Catholics and African Americans) and around 40% of the WASP-vote, Kennedy would win.⁶¹ Finally, there were some factors that worked in favour of Kennedy, which could not at all be helped by Nixon, such as Kennedy's family fortune, which enabled him to be less cautious, while Nixon had to pay heed to the demands of his contributors.⁶² There was the glamour surrounding the Kennedys, their sense of style, Jacqueline's pregnancy, Kennedy's charisma – all of which Nixon could do nothing about.⁶³ The best Nixon could do was be himself, be natural and be human. 'The man who can break through the cardboard and establish that inexplicable thing, a warm, human contact with the voters, will have an immense advantage,' Alsop writes.⁶⁴

One last factor, which deserves some more attention, were the televised debates. During the first ever televised presidential candidate debates John F. Kennedy looked healthy, tanned and energetic, while Nixon looked exhausted, ill at ease and markedly less well-dressed. Furthermore, Kennedy held almost all of the advantages of the occasion: he was the lesser known candidate, he was the most charismatic, and most importantly, he had the advantage of the offensive.⁶⁵ Kennedy could attack Nixon as part of the Eisenhower administration, and named all the unsolved problems and mistakes of the Eisenhower Administration. The offensive leaves one more options and rhetorical possibilities than when one has to defend past policies. The result of it all was that Kennedy won the elections. But it was by a very small margin indeed, comparable to the victory of Bush Jr. in 2000, with a minuscule margin that did not give Kennedy a clear mandate for (partisan) change.

Nixon had not done a bad job during the campaign, and had been a highly visible Vice-President during the Eisenhower period. Even though he lost, it was not a terribly bad loss and he still had enough political credit. But for Nixon losing the election meant the loss of his office, his staff and many other advantages of being in the government. He received plenty of job offers, but eventually settled for a law firm in Los Angeles.⁶⁶ It took just one more loss, that of the gubernatorial elections of California to Pat Brown in 1962, before Nixon's taste for politics soured considerably, and, many people thought, for ever.

“One last thing, Nixon said, during his 'last' press conference, I leave you gentlemen now and you will now write it. You will interpret it. That's your right. But as I leave you I want you to know – just think how much you're going to be missing. You won't have Nixon to kick around any more, because, gentlemen, this is my last press conference and it will be one in which I have welcomed the opportunity to test wits with you. I hope that what I have said today will at least make television, radio, the press ... recognize that they have a right and a responsibility, if they're against a candidate, to give him the shaft, but also to recognize if they give him the shaft, to put one lonely reporter on the campaign who will report what the candidate says every now and then.”⁶⁷

Nixon's statements showed his contempt for the press, which might be both rooted in low self-esteem and in his inability to trust people, and a genuine preference of the press for the Democratic party at the time. All in all, it was a very ungracious exit from politics.⁶⁸

⁶⁰ Boyer et al., *The enduring vision*, A 21.

⁶¹ Stewart Alsop, 'Nixon or Kennedy? - What the voters are saying' (24 September 1960), *The Saturday Evening Post*, 90 in 'Reader: America in the 1960s & 1970s', The University of Hull, 2010.

⁶² Ambrose, *Nixon 1913-1962*, 563.

⁶³ Ibidem.

⁶⁴ Ibidem.

⁶⁵ Ibidem, 559.

⁶⁶ Ibidem, 626-627.

⁶⁷ Ibidem, 671.

⁶⁸ Ibidem, 673.

In 1963 the Nixons moved to New York, where Nixon started to work for another law firm. Although he had said to his family that the move would prove a break from politics, Nixon never stayed out of politics completely, although he took great care to make it appear that way, and to show himself from a different side.⁶⁹ Nixon travelled widely, and often, and was nearly everywhere received as if he still was the Vice-President of the United States. Furthermore, he repeatedly criticized Kennedy's foreign policy in various interviews and speeches and so managed to keep his name afloat.⁷⁰ After President Kennedy was assassinated, Nixon shelved his plans to write a book, and reporters increasingly looked at him for the next election. He kept all of his options open in case the opportunity to run for president would rise after all, while publicly he denied any such probability. In 1966, during the mid-term elections, he supported the GOP in the various ongoing campaigns.⁷¹ Slowly but surely, he managed his way back into the GOP, and managed to enter the 1968 primaries. On the Democratic side Lyndon B. Johnson withdrew, while Robert F. Kennedy and Hubert Humphrey were gathering steam, until Robert F. Kennedy was killed in Los Angeles, on June 5. The year 1968 was one of great turmoil: Both Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. were shot dead, the anti-war movement was growing bigger and bigger in correlation with the growing number of body bags returning from Vietnam, radical and social tensions reached an all-time high, and violent riots were the order of the day. Problems galore, in short. However, most Americans, 'the silent majority,' had nothing to do with them, and just wanted law and order. Amidst these upheavals, and by appealing to this 'silent majority' Richard M. Nixon became the 37th president of the United States. He got by far the most electoral votes, but in the popular vote Nixon was only 500.000 votes ahead of Hubert Humphrey.⁷²

Nixon's first term was characterised by many successes in foreign policy and a failure to push through domestic policy, such as a healthcare reform plan, and a minimum income for every American family (FAP) that died on the Senate floor. Nixon had the country's support, but he could not get House and Senate behind his plans.⁷³ Nixon, however, made sure that the White House hired more women, established the Environmental Protection Agency and other environmental laws, as well as the Occupation Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), and bettered the fate of the Native Americans – measures which all had a lasting impact.⁷⁴ Nixon's successes in foreign policy are well known: he established a détente with the Russians, re-established relations with China, and started the global limitation of nuclear arms with the first SALT treaty. Furthermore, he gave military aid to Israel, which was in conflict with Egypt.⁷⁵ He also finished what Kennedy started, when Neil Armstrong first set foot on the moon.⁷⁶ One election promise he did not keep was pulling out of Vietnam.

Although the outcome of his manoeuvres was often successful, the way in which he executed foreign policy often completely disregarded the democratic process. Under Nixon, the State Department only dealt with minor problems, while the White House solved the important foreign policy issues on its own. When foreign policy meetings were planned, for instance with the NSC*, this was almost only done for the record – Nixon rarely changed his mind after them.⁷⁷ An example of this kind of rather secretive and undemocratic decision-making is Nixon's secret

⁶⁹ Stephen Ambrose, *The triumph of a politician: 1962-1972* (New York: Simon and Schuster 1989) 26.

⁷⁰ Ambrose, *Nixon 1962-1972*, 27.

⁷¹ Ibidem, 81.

⁷² Boyer et al., *The enduring vision*, 903

⁷³ Ambrose, *Nixon 1962-1972*, 657-658; Boyer et al., *The enduring vision*, 908-909; Emery, *Watergate*, 8.

⁷⁴ C-Span. *The legacy of Richard Nixon*. Forum. July 17, 2010. <www.c-spanvideo.org> (Accessed 24 November 2012)

⁷⁵ The Miller Center. 'American President: Richard Nixon' <www.millercenter.org> (Accessed 27 November 2012)

⁷⁶ Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazan, *America divided: the civil war of the 1960s* (New York: Oxford University Press 2008) 273.

* NSC = National Security Committee.

⁷⁷ William Bundy, *A tangled web: the making of foreign policy in the Nixon presidency* (New York: Hill and Wang 1998) 58-59.

bombing of Cambodia, of which even the Secretary of State and Chief of Staff of the Air Force knew nothing. Both Nixon and Kissinger, William Bundy writes, felt antipathy and distrust towards career officers in the State Department because they thought those officers could be disloyal, and because they thought them stodgy and resistant to change.⁷⁸ So although Nixon's foreign policy, as stated, was praiseworthy, and is in fact one of the most redeeming factors of his presidency, his style pointed towards the mistakes he would make during his second term.

Nixon's second term, then, was very short and mostly overshadowed by the Watergate Affair. First, by Nixon's attempts to contain it, and later, by his attempts to save his own skin. He started his term after a landslide victory in the presidential elections, and yet another victory for the Democrats in Congress, which gave them an even bigger majority. In spite of that, Nixon still managed to achieve the following: he arranged a cease-fire agreement in Vietnam and he supported Israel in the Yom Kippur War, though this resulted in massive oil-shortages. He also introduced new social welfare legislation and more environmental legislation. He did not, however, find a long-term solution for the very high inflation and high unemployment rates. During his second term, both the Democratic Congress and the unfolding scandal increasingly got in Nixon's way, and therefore he was less effective.

The Watergate Affair

Most of the Watergate Affair, a short-hand definition of which has been given in the Introduction, was rooted in the Committee to Re-elect the President, which was called CRP by most of its members, and was called CREEP by its critics. The committee was established during the first quarter of 1972 to make sure that Nixon would be re-elected during the next presidential elections in November. The organisation was wholly apart from the Republican Party's National Committee, which gave the CRP much more freedom, and its offices were right across the street from the White House. Eventually, John Mitchell would become head of CRP, as well as being Nixon's campaign manager. Before that, however, he was the Attorney General of the United States, so he had to resign first. In the interim Jeb Megruder was the head of CRP.⁷⁹ The links between the President and CRP were formed by some of the President's advisers, aides and former aides, and by former Attorney General John Mitchell, all of whom were both members of CRP and relatively close to the President, because of their past or present positions in the White House, and wielded some kind of influence over him, and over the Executive Power at large.⁸⁰ One other link in this 'web' is the CIA: E. Howard Hunt Jr. and G. Gordon Liddy were former CIA agents, and therefore possessed a lot of know-how in covert operations generally. Hunt and Liddy also formed the core of what came to be known as 'the Plumbers': fixers, who solved problems in underhand ways. The President was the boss, and, arguably, he did not at all times know exactly what was going on. This, in short, was the structure of the organisation which brought forth the most sensational American political scandal of the 20th century.

The fact that any of these underhand and illegal activities became known at all was due to a stuff-up during a series of dirty tricks committed in the name of CRP and the president. When the Pentagon Papers broke in 1971, Nixon was almost beside himself with anger. He ordered something, *anything*, to be done to discredit Daniel Ellsberg, who had leaked a large amount of top-secret, sensitive papers to the *New York Times*. As a result, G. Gordon Liddy and others decided to burgle Ellsberg's psychoanalyst's office and steal Ellsberg file to publish it, thinking such a manoeuvre would abate any damage to the President.⁸¹ The way in which the 'White House plumbers' dealt with Ellsberg is a clear indication of what lengths they would go to in order to discredit the opposition, or to counter-attack the negative coverage in the press. Some of Liddy's other plans, besides breaking into the headquarters of the Democratic National Committee (DNC) in

⁷⁸ Bundy, *A Tangled web*, 58.

⁷⁹ Emery, *Watergate*, 36.

⁸⁰ Ibidem, xv. ; Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward, *All the President's men* (New York: Simon and Schuster 1974) 9.

⁸¹ Emery, *Watergate*, 48,54,58-70.

the Watergate building, were plans that could have come straight from spy novels: He wanted to fire-bomb the Brookings Institution (which had a set of papers the Nixon camp wanted back), he wanted to assassinate the well-known political columnist Jack Anderson, and he wanted to lure high-standing Democrats onto a houseboat accompanied by prostitutes – only to catch them red-handed on camera afterwards.⁸² Throughout the planning of all these 'dirty tricks', including the burglary at the DNC, Nixon's closest advisers (Ehrlichman, Haldeman, Colson, Dean and Mitchell) directed Liddy & co (directly beneath them in the power structure) to go ahead with the plans, but, at the same time, insulated themselves and the President from the operations as much as possible. In case anything would be discovered, Nixon's advisers could plead ignorance of it all – a tactic which held them out of the fray for quite a long time.

The first time Hunt, Liddy and their associates broke into the DNC headquarters, on May 28, 1972, they sailed rather smoothly. They were not caught, but, one of the devices they had installed to wire-tap the DNC's phones, the one to eavesdrop on DNC chairman Lawrence O'Brien, was not working properly, so they decided to go back. But on this second entry, on June 17, very early in the morning, James W. McCord, the Plumbers' bugging man, and four others were caught by the police, after being noticed by the security guide guarding the DNC headquarters.⁸³ Liddy and Hunt were not caught by the police officers, because they were monitoring the operation from a distance. If they had been caught, of course the link between the burglary and the White House and CRP would have been discovered much earlier. The only link between the White House and the break-in that *was* discovered straight away was that McCord was on the CRP payroll. But due to a combination of sloppy work by the Washington DC police, stonewalling tactics by the CRP and disinterest of the press, the story died down. All major newspapers reported the break-in, but 'the next phase got so confused that almost everyone became bored with the Watergate story.'⁸⁴ In a survey taken that summer 57 % of the respondents had heard of the break-in, while 43% had not. The majority thought that the break-in was 'just more politics'.⁸⁵

On September 15 the five Cubans, G. Gordon Liddy and Howard Hunt were indicted, and eventually one of the men, James McCord, confessed that the White House had advance knowledge of the break-in, which enabled the FBI to link the break-in to the CRP.⁸⁶ This story appeared in the *Washington Post*, and was written by two young reporters, Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, who had eagerly pursued the story all summer.⁸⁷ The White House, however, managed to distance itself from these stories sufficiently, and they did not endanger the re-election of Richard Nixon: he won by a landslide victory (520 electoral votes), but the Democrats further consolidated their majority in both houses of Congress.⁸⁸ According to Fred Emery, Nixon learned about the break-in and CRP's involvement in it the day after it happened, on Sunday morning, but according to Nixon himself, it was Monday evening.⁸⁹ From that moment onwards, Nixon was involved in the cover-up too.⁹⁰ After the election, the four Cubans, Liddy and Hunt were all convicted by federal judge 'Maximum' John Sirica on January 30, but managed to conceal the involvement of the White House.⁹¹ A week later the Senate Select Committee on Presidential Campaign Activities (frequently called the Watergate Committee) was established, headed by Senator Sam Ervin of North Carolina. In March, with the President's knowledge, large sums of hush money were paid to keep quiet the four burglars. In April White House aid John Dean hired his own attorney and started to cooperate with the

⁸² Emery, *Watergate*, 79, 90, 98.

⁸³ *Ibidem*, 121-137.

⁸⁴ *Ibidem*, 158.

⁸⁵ The Gerald R. Ford Library & Museum, *The Watergate files*.
<http://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/museum/exhibits/watergate_files/index.html>

⁸⁶ Boyer et al., *The enduring vision*, 912 ; Ford Museum, *Watergate files*.

⁸⁷ *All the President's Men*, dir. Alan Pakula, 1976.

⁸⁸ Boyer et al., *The enduring vision*, 912.

⁸⁹ Emery, *Watergate*, 155-159.

⁹⁰ *Ibidem*, 170.

⁹¹ Boyer et al., *The enduring vision*, 912.

Watergate Committee, and was thereafter dismissed by Nixon.⁹² Also fired were H.R. Haldeman and John Ehrlichman, the President's most trusted aides, while Richard Kleindienst quit voluntarily. Nixon appointed a new Attorney General, Elliot Richardson, who in turn, as directed by Nixon, appointed Harvard law professor Archibald Cox as a special prosecutor for the court which handled the case. On May 18 the Senate Watergate Committee commenced its televised hearings, which already revealed some of the unlawful acts the White House had committed, and the involvement of the White House in the Watergate cover-up. Still, there was no hard evidence against the President himself.⁹³

Alexander Butterfield, a former aide to the President, revealed the existence of a taping system in the White House. Previously only Haldeman, the Secret Service and Butterfield knew about it, but now that the existence of the tapes was out into the open, the tapes were immediately claimed as evidence by Cox. Nixon, however, did not surrender so easily, and decided that his Attorney General Richardson should fire Cox. Both Richardson and his deputy resigned in protest, and Cox was fired by the man ranking below the deputy Attorney General, Solicitor General Robert Bork. This episode, which took place in October 1973, was quickly dubbed the 'Saturday Night Massacre' by the press.⁹⁴ In the midst of all of this Vice-President Spiro Agnew had to step down because he was convicted for graft. He was replaced by Gerald R. Ford. Meanwhile, the judicial battle for the tapes dragged on for months on end, which gave Nixon the opportunity to erase 18 1/2 minutes on one of his tapes.⁹⁵ When Nixon was finally forced to hand over all of his tapes, he refused to do so, and instead supplied edited transcripts of the tapes.⁹⁶ However, he inserted 'expletive deleted' in many places, marking out the text with a black felt pen, because he felt they were inappropriate in hindsight. On July 24, 1974, after months of haggling, the Supreme Court finally decided unanimously that the President had to surrender his tapes, and Nixon complied.⁹⁷ Meanwhile, the House Judiciary Committee had already started proceedings to impeach Nixon. When, after the tapes had been listened to carefully, it had become unmistakably clear that Nixon would be impeached, he decided to resign instead. Nixon confessed everything in a televised address on August 5, and finally left the White House by helicopter on August 9. Gerald Ford took over from him and, to the nation's great surprise, granted Nixon a pardon on September 8.

'Our long national nightmare is over' Ford said during his inauguration speech.⁹⁸ But Nixon's nightmare had only just begun: he was dishonoured, disgraced, and had lost all of his privileges. During the rest of the 1970s, he would become America's favourite scapegoat. It would take the better part of another decade, before Nixon would slowly be accepted back into the circle he formally moved in, and by the end of his life his reputation had bettered considerably. The legacy of the Watergate Affair, however, lives on. To this day, one of the most accepted modes of perceiving the federal government in the United States of America is to distrust it. To many North-Western Europeans, who all live in welfare states with large (federal) governments, it is very difficult to understand why this is the case. The fact that many Americans are against federal taxes, against federal healthcare, and in fact against so many other federal measures might perhaps be more understandable after an investigation of the cultural effects of Watergate, which will follow in due course.

⁹² Ford Museum, *Watergate files*.

⁹³ Boyer et al., *The enduring vision*, 913.

⁹⁴ Ibidem.

⁹⁵ Ford Museum, *Watergate files*.

⁹⁶ Ibidem.

⁹⁷ Ford Museum, *Watergate files*; Boyer et al., *The enduring vision*, 914.

⁹⁸ Isserman and Kazan, *America divided*, 304.

Chapter 2: Philip Roth's *Our Gang* (1971)

One of the things that most horrified people about Nixon was the way he spoke. Nixon was an ace debater, a sophist who could take both sides of one argument and win it either way. He weighed his words very carefully, could tell his audiences what they wanted to hear, and knew an opportunity when he saw one. All of these are qualities which politicians often possess, and which Nixon possessed in abundance. However, they do not always make for a likeable person. Nixon was notoriously bad at small talk, and could be tirelessly argumentative and moralistic. In his farewell speech to his staff he said: 'Never be Petty', but ironically Nixon often *was* petty.¹

Worst of all, Nixon frequently used stock expressions, clichés and phrases which had long lost their power. He could clothe his message so well, hiding behind such language, that the average American would take it for the truth, when in fact it was a calculated statement devised for Nixon's own political benefit. While the majority of Americans did not care, it dismayed members of the intelligentsia, among them Philip Roth, the Jewish-American winner of the National Book Award of 1959 for *Goodbye Columbus* and writer of the best-selling succès de scandale *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969). What angered Roth in particular were two newspaper articles on the front-page of the *New York Times* of April 4, 1971. In one, Nixon declared to be against abortion, because he could not square it with 'his personal belief in the sanctity of human life.'² In the other, he declared he would review the case of Lieutenant Calley, who had given some of the orders to kill hundreds of innocent villagers during the massacre of My Lai, in order to lessen his sentence. The result was the political satire *Our Gang* (*Starring Tricky and his Friends*), which became a best-seller.

This satirical novel by Roth clearly works on some levels, but on other levels it certainly does not. Due to the novel's theme, the abuse of language in contemporary politics (taken from Orwell), a somewhat heavy-handed theme to begin with, and due to the novel's focus on the language and rhetoric of Tricky, his character never really comes off. This, as will become clear throughout this thesis, is a common problem concerning Nixon: he is so difficult to define definitively that Nixon-related works of fiction run the risk of having an empty centre, as is, in some degree, the case in *Our Gang*.³ The work, however, is a political satire, not a bildungsroman: its aim, presumably, is to ridicule Nixon, and also, perhaps, depending on the level of depth, to criticize America. This first aim is fulfilled, and quite brilliantly so, in flights of satire reminiscent of Swift, but the second one, arguably, is not. While Roth got Nixon's language, his rhetoric and his mannerisms exactly right, and while he clearly succeeded in making Nixon look very ridiculous, and in devising a highly amusing plot that connects Tricky with the real Nixon through the clever use of rhetoric, the book lacks true cultural insight and lacks a satisfactory solution for the problems that made Roth write the book. Roth suggests that to do away with Nixon would be enough, but that simply would not do. Nixon came from somewhere, the United States made him, and thus the United States would have to change, too. Nixon was merely the man at the top, albeit a very powerful one. The anti-Nixonites were more than happy with Roth's novel and its solutions, and at the time it worked; it sold. For many Americans, at the time, Nixon *was* the Devil. People hated him, and this is reflected by Roth's novel. But because Roth chose to demonize Nixon, and not much more than that, the novel never gained the broad popular and critical approval that would have made it a true literary success. With the exception of a few cultural scholars interested in Nixon, the novel has not received much attention from scholars, let alone from the broader public.

To examine this interesting work of satire, starring Nixon as 'devil', let us begin at the beginning of the book: two quotes, the first by Jonathan Swift and the second by George Orwell. The first is a

¹ Richard M. Nixon, 'Never be petty – always remember others' (8 August 1974, The White House) <www.youtube.com> accessed 17 January 2013.

² Philip Roth, *Our gang (starring Tricky and his friends)* (London: Cape 1971) 2.

³ This thesis is posed by John F. Keener in 'Writing the vacuum: Richard Nixon as a literary figure' in *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, winter 2000, vol. 41, no. 2.

citation from 'A Voyage to the Houhnhnms', which is the fourth chapter and fourth voyage in *Gulliver's Travels*. This final voyage sets Gulliver between a race of horses, Houyhnhms, who live entirely by reason except for few well-controlled and muted social affections, and their slaves, the Yahoos, whose bodies are obscene caricatures of the human body and who have no glimmer of reason but are mere creatures of appetite and passions.⁴ The citation is as follows:

And I remember frequent Discourses with my Master concerning the Nature of Manhood, other Parts of the World; having Occasion to talk of *Lying*, and *false Representation*, it was with much Difficulty that he comprehended what I meant; although he had otherwise a most acute Judgement. For he argued thus; That the Use of Speech was to make us understand one another, and to receive Information of Facts; now if anyone *said the Thing which was not*, these Ends were defeated; because I cannot properly be said to understand him; and I am so far from receiving Information, that he leaves me worse than in Ignorance; for I am led to believe a Thing *Black* when it is *White*, and *Short* when it is *Long*. And these were all the Notions he had concerning that Faculty of Lying, so perfectly well understood, and so universally practised among human Creatures.⁵

This citation about lying and misrepresentations can be interpreted both as a pointer towards Roth's literary aspirations with this book, as the 18th century was the golden age of satire in England, and Swift was one of its biggest stars, and as the first attack on Nixon, who knew very well how to lie, as is demonstrated by the smear campaigns of his early career, and would be demonstrated later by his 'stonewalling' during the Watergate Affair.

The second quote is by George Orwell (a pseudonym for Eric Blair) from one of Orwell's most famous essays, 'Politics and the English Language', written in 1946. It is as follows:

One ought to recognize that the present political chaos is connected with the decay of language, and that one can probably bring about some improvement by starting at the verbal end [...] Political language – and with its variations this is true of all political parties, from Conservatives to Anarchists – is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind.⁶

While this thesis does not deal with Orwell generally, it is worthwhile to look into the essay briefly, and to pinpoint why the essay may have inspired Roth. The point of the essay is that the state of a language and that of politics are related: by using, for instance, a strongly Latinate diction and by using dead metaphors one can muddle the meaning of words, or worse, lie, without drawing much attention to it, because these words do not evoke any strong images or emotions in their recipients (the readers or audience).⁷ Thus, if politicians habitually speak in this muddled way, one knows that they probably have something to hide, and that such muddled language will work to their own advantage – while it leaves the audience, to speak with Swift, 'worse than in Ignorance', that is, misinformed. Being a writer, and being naturally sensitive to the (ab)use of language, Roth very much disliked Nixon for his dead metaphors and stock phrases. Moreover, like Orwell, he saw Nixon's abuse of the English language as a symptom of (what he thought of as) the general malaise in politics, and Nixon's opportunism.

Now, from these two quotes, one can conclude two things. First, that the mode of this book will be satiric. And second, that the theme of the book will be the abuse and decay of language. Furthermore, the title *Our Gang (Starring Tricky and his Friends)* tells one that this book is about Tricky and his friends, or 'Tricky Dick, i.e. Richard Nixon' and his 'friends', i.e. political allies. They are called a 'gang', which has negative connotations, and they are 'our gang', because they are our (Roth and his fellow Americans') President and his ministers, secretaries and advisers. Moreover,

⁴ Stephan Greenblatt and M.H. Abrams ed., 'Gulliver's travels: Introduction' in *The Norton anthology of English literature Volume I* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006, eight edition) 2323-2324.

⁵ Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's travels* as cited in Roth, *Our Gang*, i.

⁶ George Orwell, 'Politics and the English language', as cited in Roth, *Our Gang*, i.

⁷ George Orwell, 'Politics and the English language' in Greenblatt and Abrams, *The Norton anthology of English literature Volume I*, 2384-2293.

the work being a satire, one may both conclude that Nixon and his associates will be the ones to be ridiculed, and that the book will probably have a moral purpose.

The occasion which made Roth write the book has been mentioned briefly already: two articles about the President on the same front page of *The New York Times* of April 4, one on abortion, and the other about the My Lai Massacre.⁸ The first featured the statement given by Nixon on the previous day:

From personal and religious beliefs I consider abortions an unacceptable form of population control. Furthermore, unrestricted abortion policies, or abortion on demand, I cannot square with my personal belief in the sanctity of human life – including the life of the yet unborn. For, surely, the unborn have rights also, recognized in law, recognized even in principles expounded by the United Nations. Signed, Richard Nixon, San Clemente, April 3, 1971.⁹

On the same day, Nixon decided to review the case of First Lieutenant William Calley, who was accused of having instigated, and having participated with his company in the killing of several hundreds of Vietnamese, in order to lighten his punishment. 'The discrepancy between those two statements became an irresistible satirical target,' says Roth in the *New York Times*. 'How could the President display such leniency over a verdict concerning the killing of civilians and then pretend such piety over 'the life of the yet unborn'? (...) It was the height of moral insensitivity.'¹⁰ In an interview with the *Atlantic Monthly*, Roth said that Nixon was the sole reason for writing a political satire, a genre of literature which Roth had not published before. 'Why have I turned to political satire? In a word: Nixon. What triggered – that's the word for it, too – what triggered *Our Gang* was his response to the Calley conviction back in April 1971.(...) I thought: Tricky, I knew you were a moral ignoramus, fraudulent right down to your shoelaces, but truly, I did not think that even you would sink to something like this.'¹¹ These words show Roth's loathing for Nixon. For Philip Roth 'Satire is moral rage transformed into comic art.'¹²

With the preceding lines the most important characteristics of the novel have now been established, as well as the occasion for the novel. However, before the novel can be examined into more detail, a brief description of the plot is needed. The two events described above are the starting point of the book. In the first chapter Tricky comforts a troubled citizen who is worried that during the massacre at My Lai Lieutenant Calley might have accidentally given one of the female victims an abortion, by killing her while she was pregnant. This chapter satirizes the President and his handling of the Calley Case. It puts two previously unrelated events in the same frame, just as the two articles were connected by both being on the front page of the *New York Times*. In the second chapter of the book, Tricky gives a press conference regarding his April 3 statement: He proposes foetuses should have the right to vote, because the unborn have rights too. He even wants to make this his life's work, comparing himself to Dr. Martin Luther King. In this chapter Tricky is questioned by several journalists, with names such as 'Mr Asslick' and 'Mr. Fascinated'. In the third chapter, called 'Tricky has another crisis', Tricky confers with his advisers. The result of the press conference was that the Boy Scouts stage Anti-Tricky protests and chant that 'Trick E. Dixon favours sexual intercourse', and that he is a dirty old man.¹³ To counter the Boy Scouts, Tricky needs a plan. Highbrow Coach (Henry Kissinger) proposes to 'pin the rap' on someone, to blame someone for inciting the riots.¹⁴ After a long and complicated voting session, Tricky and his team of advisers

⁸ Brooke Allen. 'Roth reconsidered', *The New Criterion* 24 (2005), 14-22; *The New York Times*, 'President opposes unlimited abortion' and 'Nixon declares he will review the Calley case' (4-5 May 1971) via ProQuest Historical Newspapers Database <<http://search.proquest.com>>.

⁹ *New York Times*, 'President opposes unlimited abortion' (5 May 1971).

¹⁰ Henry Raymond, 'Sly Roth emerges: new book and play', *The New York Times* (26 October 1971) via ProQuest Historical Newspapers Database <<http://search.proquest.com>>.

¹¹ Philip Roth, *Reading myself and others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Grioux 1975) 50-51.

¹² *Ibidem*, 53.

¹³ Roth, *Our gang*, 30-33.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, 51.

decide to blame Curt Flood, a baseball player who has fled to Copenhagen, the pornography capital of the world. In the next and fourth chapter, 'Tricky Addresses the Nation', Tricky explains why the country had to invade Copenhagen (to battle against pornography) and that the American army has captured the town of Elsinore, home to Hamlet's Castle. He also talks about the deaths of three Boy Scouts. In the fifth chapter Tricky is assassinated and found naked, curled up in the foetal position in a man-sized uterus-shaped plastic bag filled with water. Reverend Billy Cupcake (Billy Graham) gives the eulogy, aided by definitions on leadership out of Webster's dictionary. In the last chapter 'On the comeback trail; or Tricky in Hell', Tricky has gone to Hell and goes straight into campaign mode to beat Satan and become Hell's new upper Devil. The book ends with Tricky's election speech, and after that a quote from *The Book of Revelations*, in which an angel locks the Devil up in a pit, so that he can never return and 'deceive the nations no more.'¹⁵

This was a brief, but by no means complete synopsis of the book. The story, as one would have gathered from the summary, is highly complicated and fantastical. If one had no knowledge of the events and the people Roth satirizes, the book would be very hard to understand, and, in fact, merely bizarre. Most readers, of course, would have had the necessary knowledge; one only had to read the papers. Moreover, Roth makes it quite clear whom he satirizes with the names he gives his characters: 'Trick E. Dixon' is Richard M. Nixon, 'Robert F. Charisma' is Robert F. Kennedy, 'Mr. Heehaw' is Herbert E. Hoover, 'Secretary Lard' is Secretary of Defence Melvin R. Laird, 'Reverend Billy Cupcake' is Billy Graham, and 'Highbrow Coach' is Henry Kissinger. Most fictional names are either (near) homophones, speaking names, or anagrams. However, for contemporary readers, who have only a limited knowledge of the Nixon Presidency, the key to understanding this text is the language itself. As stated previously, Roth was inspired to write *Our Gang* by two seemingly incongruous statements of Nixon which were standing side by side on the frontpage of the *New York Times*. The whole book, in fact, is filled with people and events that would have dotted the newspapers and the television at the time. One only needs to mention Curt Flood, a famous baseball player, or Jane Fonda, the actress. Furthermore, well-known words spoken by Nixon, Kennedy and others are echoed and satirized in the book. All in all, one can say that the book is a mishmash of current affairs and an attack at the 'pure wind' spoken by politicians, all peppered with a big dash of Rothian absurdity.

The trick then, is to first figure out to which event or person Roth is referring in a specific case, and then to see in what way it is satirized. As stated, the language is the key: Roth often uses phrases taken out of well-known speeches and twists them around. An example of this is the speech Nixon gave on Vietnam on April 30, 1970, a speech in which he explains and justifies the American incursion into Cambodia. What Nixon said was the following:

Whether I may be a one-term President is insignificant compared to whether by our failure to act in this crisis the United States proves itself to be unworthy to lead the forces of freedom in this critical period of history. I would rather be a one-term president and do what I believe was right than to be a two-term President at the cost of seeing America become a second-rate power and to see this nation accept the first defeat in its proud 190-year history.¹⁶

On the third page, of *Our Gang* (preceded by the Orwell and Swift quotes and the April 3 statement) Tricky says:

I know I could have done the popular thing, of course and come out *against* the sanctity of human life. But frankly I'd rather be a one-term President and do what I believe is right than be a two-term President by taking an easy position like that. After all, I have got my conscience to deal with, as well as the electorate.¹⁷

Roth has copied those parts of the above that are most memorable, such as the one-term president

¹⁵ Roth, *Our gang*, 201.

¹⁶ Richard M. Nixon. "Cambodian incursion address" (30 April 1970, Washington DC) <www.americanrhetoric.com> Accessed 13 December 2012.

¹⁷ Roth, *Our gang*, 3.

phrase, also recently used by President Barack Obama, and he has complemented those with irony and sarcasm.¹⁸ A leftist, anti-Nixonite might well find this quite amusing, since according to him/her all of Vietnam, and especially the Cambodian incursion, *had* become a travesty of the sanctity of human life – after all, what were the USA doing in Vietnam in the first place? And, perhaps, he or she might think Nixon had no conscience to speak of. These speeches join the fictional Tricky and the real Tricky Dick together, which makes it satirical.

Another speech which figures often in *Our Gang* is the speech Nixon gave on Vietnam on November 3, 1969, later dubbed the 'Silent Majority Speech.' Nixon delivered the address to counteract the growing unrest over the Vietnam War, which led to mass-protests, and to the death of three students at Kent State University. His message was clear: The anti-war protesters were but a minority, and they did not have the right to monopolize the media and influence policy the way they did. In this speech Nixon said: 'I recognize that some of my fellow citizens disagree with the plan for peace I have chosen. Honest and patriotic Americans have reached different conclusions as to how peace should be achieved (...) If a vocal minority, however fervent its cause, prevails over reason and the will of the majority, this nation has no future as a free society.'¹⁹ Later on in his speech Nixon appeals to the majority of people, who were still behind him, and who agreed with his policies: 'And so tonight – to you, the great silent majority of my fellow Americans – I ask for your support.'²⁰ In *Our Gang* the 'unborn', foetuses, are the great and literally silent majority Nixon speaks of. Roth, arguably rightly so, ridiculed Nixon's term 'The Great Silent Majority.' Linguistically, it may indeed be a somewhat foolish phrase: How can a majority, a *silent* majority be great, when it has nothing to deserve that epithet? And that the majority was great, in the sense of large, would be rather logical in a country like the U.S.A. Politically, however, the speech was brilliant, and excellently timed, and fruitful. The great silent majority were those who did not participate in the Counterculture movement – hard-working people quietly living their lives – still the majority of Americans. They elected Nixon. All the more reason for Roth, who, as a left-wing intellectual and writer can be considered a liberal, to attack and ridicule this great silent majority. Right from the beginning of the novel, Roth takes the idea, twists Nixon's words, and runs away with them. Tricky says:

“I will not be intimidated by extremists or militants or violent fanatics from bringing justice and equality to those who live in the womb. [...] If ever there was a group in this country that was “disadvantaged,” in the sense that they are utterly without representation or a voice in our national government, it is not the blacks or the Puerto Ricans or the hippies or what-have-you, all of whom have their spokesmen, but these infinitesimal creatures up there on the placenta.”²¹

This a clear echo of what Nixon said in the actual speech. In chapter two the journalist 'Mr Fascinated' asks Tricky the following question about the enfranchisement of the unborn:

“Mr. President, I am fascinated by the technological aspect. Can you give us just an inkling of how exactly the unborn will go about casting their ballots? I'm particularly fascinated by these embryos on the placenta, who haven't even developed nervous systems yet, let alone limbs such as we use in an ordinary voting machine.”²²

Tricky's answer is:

“Well, first off, let me remind you that nothing in our Constitution denies a man the right to vote just because he is physically handicapped. That isn't the kind of country we have here. We have many wonderful handicapped people in this country, but of course, they're not

¹⁸ Mark Mooney, ABC News. 'Exclusive: Obama would rather be really good one-term President' (25 January 2010) <www.abcnews.com> Accessed on 17 January 2013.

¹⁹ Nixon, Richard M. “Silent majority speech.” (3 November 1969) <www.cnsnews.com> Accessed 3 December 2013.

²⁰ Ibidem.

²¹ Roth, *Our gang*, 12-13.

²² Ibidem, 21.

“news” the way the demonstrators are.”²³

Mr. Fascinated then slightly rephrases his question:

“I wasn’t suggesting, sir, that just because these embryos don’t have central nervous systems they should be denied the right to vote – I was thinking again of the fantastic *mechanics* of it. How, for instance, will the embryos be able to weigh the issues and make intelligent choices from among the candidates, if they are not able to read the newspapers or watch the news on television?”²⁴

Nixon then answers:

“Well, it seems to me that you have actually touched upon the very strongest claim that the unborn have for enfranchisement, and why it is such a crime they have been denied the vote for so long. Here, at long last, we have a great bloc of voters who simply are not going to be taken in by the lopsided and distorted versions of the truth that are presented to the American public through the various media.”²⁵

Again and again, as demonstrated by the quotes above, the notion of 'the great silent majority', the great bloc of voters who were behind Nixon, is ridiculed. Arguably, this, too, is one of the most amusing parts of the book. And all Roth has done is to understand 'the great silent majority' as those who literally cannot speak (yet): the unborn – foetuses – mentioned in the next column of the newspaper.

The two examples of speeches of Nixon as used by Roth, particularly the 'great silent majority' speech, show Roth's abilities in the satirical mode and his clever use of Nixon's words. These 'flights of satire,' reminiscent of *Gulliver's Travels*, are a great way to ridicule and attack a certain notion. But the question is, apart from it being humorous, does Roth's satire contain any real insights or any solutions to the problems it addresses? By citing Orwell and Swift at the beginning of *Our Gang*, Roth has shown that he means business. This book is not meant merely as amusement, but addresses a problem current in society at that time: the abuse of language in politics, harmful to both politics and the American people. This abuse of language, in Orwellian terms, leads to political chaos. In 1971, one can now safely say, there was political chaos: The US were still fighting in Vietnam and this led to mass-demonstrations and even violent riots. Vietnam, the anti-war movement, economic problems and social and racial tensions were dividing the country. Also, the rift between Republicans and Democrats was becoming bigger and bigger. All the more reason, then, to be inspired by Orwell and Swift, and write a biting satire on all of these things. The other 'problem' addressed in the book is Richard Nixon, whose moral stupidity in general, and not just in the case of Lieutenant Calley, incenses Roth. 'Look at him today,' Roth said in an interview with Auberon Waugh in the *Atlantic Monthly* in the fall of 1971, 'positively gaga over his trip to Red China, as he used to like to call it when he was debating Kennedy. Now he says the "People's Republic of China" as easily as any Weatherman. Doesn't he stand for anything? It turns out he isn't even anti-Communist.'²⁶

While it is indeed a strange turn that the formerly strongly anti-Communist Nixon would appease communist China, Nixon's moral stupidity does not justify such a sustained attack on him alone. All the blame for the decade's problems is piled on Nixon. This suggestion is supported by the ending of the book. The quote from Revelations on the last page of the book suggest that locking up Nixon for a thousand years in a bottomless pit would solve America's troubles.²⁷ This ending makes the book lose literary credibility. Anyone who would look at the political situation

²³ Roth, *Our gang*, 21.

²⁴ Ibidem, 21-22.

²⁵ Ibidem, 22.

²⁶ Roth, *Reading myself and others*, 51

²⁷ 'The Book of Revelations' of the Holy Bible, as printed in Roth, *Our gang*, 201: Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key of the bottomless pit and a great chain. And he seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil ... and bound him for a thousand years, and threw him into a pit, and shut it and sealed it over him, that he should deceive the nations no more. (in capital letters)

during Nixon's first term seriously would realise that many of the problems had already risen in the terms of his predecessors and they could not possibly be the work of one man. Apart from deeming Nixon the source of all evil, Roth also does not explain where Nixon came from and who elected him, which adds to the book's problems. 'Painting himself into an ideological corner, Roth cannot construct a plausible explanation for the politician's success. In fact, Roth would have us believe that Nixon was elected president without any popular support.'²⁸ After all, nobody at all grieves for him, and everybody tries to claim credit for his assassination. While this is a very funny sequence in the book, it still does not explain why the people have elected Tricky. When examining these flaws in the book, one needs to keep in mind the satiric nature of the book. The fact that Nixon is found drowned in a baggie, in the fetal position, is merely 'satiric retribution, parodic justice', according to Roth. 'And in the next chapter he's alive and well anyway. In Hell, admittedly, but debating the pants off Satan, whom he's running against for Devil. I subtitled that last chapter "On the Comeback Trail" to suggest that you can't hold a Trick E. Dixon down, even by stuffing him into a Baggie and turning the twister seal.'²⁹ Be that as it may, the ideological problems remain. Just like other Nixon works of the era, Daniel Frick, author of *Reinventing Nixon: A Cultural History of an American Obsession* writes, 'the book reduces Nixon to one dimension, making him the quintessence of political nefariousness – if not the devil himself, then, at least, a particularly malignant spirit. For Philip Roth and other liberals, Nixon appears as a singular source of evil whose removal will restore an otherwise sound political system to working order.'³⁰

In the chapter 'Further Adventures in American Political Demonology' Frick discusses many other works in which this is the case. In two plays, Nixon was compared to Shakespeare's horrible, Machiavellian king Richard III, in a sketch on *Saturday Night Live* Nixon was a vampire terrorizing the country (the only way to vanquish him is to drive a stake through Nixon's biography), in Philip K. Dick's *Radio Free Albemuth* Nixon was the leader of a totalitarian state and in Ischmael Reed's 'D Hexorcism of Noxon D Awful' Nixon was a grotesque otherworldly demon.³¹ Matt Groening indulged in frequent Nixon-bashing in both *Futurama* and *The Simpsons*, which, other than the works just mentioned, are extremely successful and popular shows that regularly reach millions of viewers.^{32*} This demonization of Richard Nixon was the first and easiest way of dealing with Nixon and resulted in sometimes very entertaining, and sometimes very grim works of popular culture, in which Nixon is just plain evil, a devil, or even the American Hitler, and the epitome of all human evil.³³

While it is a success in many ways, *Our Gang* is somewhat flawed in ideological terms. It is simply too easy to blame Nixon for everything and to make him the butt of all the jokes. While Nixon was politically very powerful, and while his public statements were influential and successful, he cannot be said to be the source of all evil, however attractive this might be for a Counterculture intellectual and anti-Nixonite writer, and however much his readers might enjoy it. These flaws, in which the work, as we shall see later on in this thesis, does not at all stand alone, are partly compensated by Roth's brilliant use of Nixon's own words, and the highly amusing, and bizarre plot which Roth distilled out of two articles on the front-page of the *New York Times*.

²⁸ Daniel Frick, *Reinventing Richard Nixon: A cultural history of an American obsession* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2008) 140.

²⁹ Roth, *Reading myself and others*, 54.

³⁰ Frick, *Reinventing Richard Nixon*, 136.

³¹ *Ibidem*, 141, 143, 153, 154.

³² *Ibidem*, 169.

* *Futurama*: All the president's heads (2011), A head in the polls (1999). *The Simpsons*: Duffless (1993).

³³ Frick, *Reinventing Richard Nixon*, 138.

Chapter 3: Gore Vidal's *Burr* (1973) and Nixon in the Courtroom

I had assumed that *Burr* would be unpopular. My view of American history is much too realistic. Happily, Nixon, who made me a popular playwright, (the worst man in *The Best Man* was based on him) again came to the rescue. Watergate so shook the three percent of our population who read books that they accepted *Burr*, a book that ordinarily they would have burned while reciting the Pledge of Allegiance to the flag.¹

Clearly, Gore Vidal's novel *Burr* is about Aaron Burr. Nixon is never mentioned in the book and there are no indications whatsoever that *Burr* should be read as an allegory. Then why is *Burr* discussed here? As the quote above indicates, the book's message was very relevant during the first half of the 1970s. While *Burr* was written after years of thorough preparation and research, and while the book must have been practically finished at the time of Watergate, readers instantly linked the book with the scandal. Overall, the reputation of Aaron Burr was bad, but apparently something in the book, and something about Watergate made people reconsider things. And that is exactly why this book will be discussed here: after all this thesis deals with the representation of Nixon and Watergate in works of popular culture, intentional or not, and in this case 'representation' in the broadest sense of the word.

It is important to know that Gore Vidal was a political man, a man with opinions very much his own. He was somewhat of a public figure, who was admired for his sharp and lucid essays. He was also a prolific writer of fiction, but those efforts were not necessarily equally appreciated. In *Burr* Vidal not only tells the remarkable story of Aaron Burr, but he also expresses his own views about the pitfalls of the American political system and examines the American presidency as it developed in the early days of the Republic. Thus, the book self-consciously addresses American history. It paints a very vivid, but human image of the Founding Fathers, it depicts the ideas that shaped the Constitution, and it stands up for Aaron Burr, one of the villains of American history. All of this has the effect of a mirror.

Essentially, by shedding new light on the foundation era and Aaron Burr's role in it, and by once again explaining the ideals of the Founding Fathers, as well as their mistakes, Vidal reminds his readers just exactly what the United States were meant to be about – as opposed to the present (late 1960s, early 1970s) turmoil. While there are no demonstrations against Vietnam in *Burr*, and no Weathermen or Black Panthers, the book thematically addresses some of the problems which caused Watergate: the rise of the so-called Imperial Presidency, internal divisions, and a partisan political culture unconcerned with honour and rife with slander. Of course Vidal cannot be credited with foreseeing the Watergate Affair. He did, however, write a historical novel that dealt with many of the important issues at the time. The book somewhat brought Aaron Burr out of the bad books, and simultaneously expressed Vidal's views on the American political system. Vidal succeeded marvellously and beyond his own expectations. The book *Burr* became a best-seller, and it has stood the test of time.

Before we discuss *Burr* in more detail, let us first discuss the plot. In the book, Burr's life is told by Charlie Schuyler, a young journalist working for the newspaper the *Evening Post*, who also happens to work as a clerk in Colonel Burr's law office. The elections are coming up, with Martin van Buren pitted against Henry Clay. It is rumoured that Van Buren is really Burr's son. Leggett, one of Charlie's bosses at the *Evening Post*, and a very political man, is in favour of Clay. He instructs Charlie to write a pamphlet that Burr is Van Buren's father, so that Clay will win. After all, ties with Burr, the traitor and killer of Hamilton, would discredit Van Buren. Burr rather likes Charlie, and therefore it is quite easy for Charlie to get Burr talking about the old days. In fact, Burr appoints Charlie as his second, unofficial biographer, Matt Davis being the official one. Burr gives the material he has already written himself to Charlie, and, when Charlie has finished revising those

¹ Gerald Clarke, 'Gore Vidal, the art of fiction No. 50', *The Paris Review*, No. 59, Fall 1974.

(the reader reads these manuscripts too) they have 'sessions' in which Burr recounts his life to Charlie, aided by letters, newspaper cuttings and the like.

In these sessions, Burr gives a somewhat different version of some of the most famous events of American history: the battle of Monmouth Court House, the winter at Valley Forge (both in the War of Independence), his Vice-Presidency, the duel with Hamilton, his adventures in the West and the subsequent treason trial. Jefferson, Washington, Hamilton and the other Founding Fathers were real people to Burr, with flaws and contradictions, and so this is how the reader gets to know these important figures, too. George Washington is brilliant, but dull and extremely fat, and a useless commander in chief, who never won an important battle in his life. The tall and ginger-haired Jefferson is a mesmerizing speaker in private, but dreads public speaking to the point that nobody is able to hear him during his inauguration speech because he whispers. Also, we learn (from James Monroe) 'that his insincerity is always spontaneous and never contrived.'² In the course of the book, the readers meets almost all of the Founding Fathers. Under Vidal's hands they truly live and breathe. The reader gets to know both their brilliance and their flaws, and their dirty secrets. Of pivotal importance to the plot are the duel between Hamilton and Burr, which ends their rivalry, and the trial, in which a new enmity is played out: that between Jefferson and Burr.

Outside these sessions, Charlie meets up with old acquaintances of Burr to find out even more about his elusive past. Charlie also starts an affair with Helen Jewett, a prostitute working in the brothel of Mrs Townsend. When the story starts, the older Burr has just married 'Madame,' Elizabeth Jumel, née Bowen, then the richest woman in New York City. The two have quite a tempestuous relationship, with many quarrels. Burr is not faithful to his new wife; he has a mistress in Jersey City. When they are caught, Madame proceeds to divorce Burr. The book ends with Burr's death, minutes after which a letter arrives which says that the divorce has come through, and, after that reveals that Burr was Charlie's father. This revelation is made by Sam Swartwout, who visits Charlie when has become the ambassador to the Kingdom of the two Sicilies. Charlie is proud and happy to have had Burr as a father.

Without a doubt, this summary is incomplete; a life as long and eventful as Colonel Aaron Burr's, and a plot so full as that of *Burr* are hard to grasp in a few words. The bottom line of the book is: Burr was an honourable gentleman, who was not in any way more fraudulent or opportunist than his contemporaries, but rather less so. He was also ahead of his time in many ways:

“Ahead of the times! That should be on his tombstone. Aaron Burr always saw the future first. Yet never profited by it. But he improves. That German settler scheme was only a couple of years premature. Now, in a matter of months' – the hoarse voice dropped beneath that of the men at the bar – 'Texas is going to break away from Mexico *and the President is involved.*'”³

What almost got Burr beheaded in 1807 was perfectly acceptable thirty or so years later, when the phrase 'manifest destiny,' coined by New York Democrat John O'Sullivan, entered the textbooks and Texas was annexed by President James K. Polk.⁴ Here, as throughout the rest of the book, Vidal is aware of the tides of history. At times, the book seems almost prophetic. Or, to put it differently, Vidal knew his Founding Fathers, and he knew that history often repeats itself. Apart from being in sync with the times, the book is also self-conscious about it being a historical novel. One of the main questions the book poses is: how does *a* history become *the* history of a country? This question is partly answered by the episode in which Burr re-enacts the duel at Weehawken, with Charlie taking the role of Hamilton. Burr says 'You know, I made Hamilton a giant by killing him. If he had lived, he would have continued his decline. He would have been quite forgotten by now. Like me.'⁵ This kind of 'what-if history' is always an interesting pursuit. When one considers Vidal's

² Vidal, *Burr*, 344.

³ Ibidem, 440.

⁴ Boyer et al., *The enduring vision*, 386.

⁵ Vidal, *Burr*, 366.

ambivalence towards the Kennedys and when one considers that Vidal favoured Adlai Stevenson in the 1960 democratic primaries, all of a sudden this is Vidal speaking, as well as Burr.⁶⁷

All in all, the book is very positive about Burr, who was mostly known for killing the hero Alexander Hamilton, trying to conquer Mexico, and trying to break up the Union. But the book is more than just a biography of Burr. It touches on all kinds of issues that were important during the Nixon era: War, civil unrest and the nature of the American presidency are the most important ones. Richard Poirier, who reviewed *Burr* for the *Washington Post*, writes that the book is not simply about Burr and the treason trial. "It is also about a much larger problem: to what does anything or anyone truly belong?"⁸ This dilemma, of course, is as old as the world itself. During both Charlie Schuyler's and Nixon's time, divisions in society loomed large. The country was very divided, unsettled even, in both eras. Charlie and the older Burr witness the mayhem of the 1834 abolition riots in New York City.⁹¹⁰ In such a time, the question of 'where do I belong' is perhaps more important. *Burr* is not only a biography of Aaron Burr, but also the 'bildung' of Charlie Schuyler, which is counterpointed by Burr's death. By the end of the book, Charlie has finally found a place and a person to belong to, and the question is resolved. Interestingly, Charlie does not belong in America, but in Italy, at least, until he will be sent to a different embassy. Gore Vidal himself lived in Italy most of the time, and in general did not like his own country very much.¹¹ Charlie, too, has no desire to return. Both facts show Vidal's disaffection with his own country.

Part of Vidal's disaffection stemmed from the nature of the American presidency. Historically, American presidents had drawn to themselves ever more power, which ultimately, Vidal believed, could lead to the abuse of power, and, in the worst case, a kind of dictatorship.¹² Arthur Meyer Schlesinger Jr., in his book *The Imperial Presidency*, does not go quite as far as that, but he is extremely critical of the Nixon Administration.¹³ According to Schlesinger, the imperialisation of the American presidency was a long process which culminated in Watergate. The extension and abuse of presidential power, he writes, constituted the underlying issue, the issue that, as we have seen, Watergate raised to the surface, dramatized and made politically accessible. Watergate was the by-product of a larger revolutionary purpose, Schlesinger writes. At the same time, it was the fatal mistake that provoked and legitimized resistance to the revolutionary

⁶ Gore Vidal and Jackie Kennedy Onassis at one time shared the same stepfather, Hugh Auchinsloss. Vidal made much of this connection. He socialized with the Kennedy's, but at the same time was somewhat ambivalent towards them, or, according to some accounts, disliked or even hated them. See 'The sharpest tongue in the West: The waspish wit and elegant controversy of Gore Vidal' <<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2182348/Gore-Vidal-Sharpest-tongue-West.html#axzz2KKFy3OxA>> and 'Robert Fulford: Gore Vidal, the No. 1 anti-American American' <http://fullcomment.nationalpost.com/2012/08/01/robert-fulford-gore-vidal-the-no-1-anti-american-american/> Both accessed <08-02-2013>.

⁷ Reviewer George Dangerfield of the *New York Times* calls this 'Vidal-Burr', to signify that this is Burr, mediated by Vidal, and to show that *Burr* is a historical novel, not a mere biography. 'Burr. Less than history and less than fiction', *The New York Times*. 28 October 1973.

⁸ Richard Poirier, 'The heart has its treasons: Burr. By Gore Vidal.' *The Washington Post* (Oct 28, 1973) via ProQuest Historical Newspapers Database <<http://search.proquest.com>>.

⁹ Vidal, *Burr*, 258.

¹⁰ http://people.hofstra.edu/alan_j_singer/ via Google. Accessed 8 February 2013.

¹¹ In several interviews, Vidal notes, among other things, that there are no real intellectuals in the U.S.A., that the clever people of America are dull, that American critics hardly know everything, and that American's haven't got a clue about their own history. Also, he dislike the news on television, and the way in which people form their opinions. 'Gore Vidal, The Art of Fiction No. 50' in *The Paris Review* (9 January 1974); 'An Interview with Gore Vidal' in *New England Review* (Winter 1991); 'The autumn of our discontent' in *The New Statesman* (11 October 2010).

¹² Gore Vidal, in *The New Statesmen*: "I should not in the least be surprised if there were a kind of dictatorship at the end of the road, which seems to be coming more and more quickly as we lose more and more wars."

¹³ A critical note on Schlesinger Jr.: Schlesinger was one of America's most cherished historians, but, like Vidal, a staunch Liberal. This means he has a tendency to be partisan, and a liberal outlook on some of the issues he discussed in his books.

presidency.¹⁴ 'Revolutionary' here refers to the kind of broad presidential privilege Nixon wanted, the kind reminiscent of absolute rulers such as King Charles I of England and Scotland. The issue of presidential privilege, as Schlesinger writes, was made politically accessible and resurfaced because of Watergate, and in particular because of the battle over the White House tapes.

The proceedings of Sam Ervin's Watergate Senate Select Committee were broadcast on national television throughout the summer of 1973, and the newspapers gave detailed accounts of the struggle over the White House Tapes in *United States v. Nixon*. The United States has been said to be a 'nation of lawyers.' It would be hard to pinpoint any other country where common people know more about their rights and about their Constitution than the United States. Many people wondered whether Nixon would give over the tapes, and whether he was obliged to do so, according to the Constitution. Meanwhile, *Burr* was published for the first time. As I stated previously, reviewers took note of the parallels: 'The analogues of past to present, the parallels and resemblances by which we discover our problems remarkably enacted in history, will surprise and excite readers,' writes Richard Poirier for the *Washington Post*¹⁵. 'What an employment for the usable past! What a hagiography for the Nixon era!' writes Christopher Lehmann-Haupt of the *New York Times*.¹⁶ And, on the treason trial, Philip Toynee writes in *The Observer*: 'It is this episode, incidentally, which has been so much in the news lately as the last occasion when an American President was subpoenaed to attend a court, and also ordered to produce documents for the scrutiny of the judiciary.'¹⁷

Now, what did happen the last time around when an American President was subpoenaed? And in what way did *United States v. Nixon* resemble that case? In 1807, Aaron Burr, by then no longer Vice-President to Thomas Jefferson, stood on trial for forming a filibuster¹⁸ in order to conquer Mexico. Roughly sixty years later, at the beginning of the Reconstruction Era in the year 1868, Andrew Johnson was the first American President to face impeachment over his dismissal of Secretary of War Henry Stanton. However, his adversaries fell one vote short of a two-thirds majority, and he, unlike Nixon, was able to serve out the rest of his term.¹⁹ A century later, in 1973, Nixon was questioned by the Senate Select Committee, and, later by the Supreme Court, because he was ultimately responsible for the break-in at the Democratic Headquarters at the Watergate Hotel. Only when Alexander Butterfield revealed that the President had a taping device in the White House did the matter of executive privilege arise.

Both Jefferson and Nixon refused to cooperate, or are commonly thought of to have done so, in Jefferson's case, because they thought they had 'executive privilege.' But this was not at all clear. In both cases some of the best legal minds of the country scratched their heads, and wondered who was right about the Constitution. Both cases received a lot of attention from the press and, in Nixon's case, on television. Richmond, where Burr's trial took place, was filled to the bursting with people who had come to watch the trial: 'It is like a play, I thought, as I looked about me. Men so crowded the court-room that some were obliged to stand in the open windows [...]' Burr ponders.²⁰ And later on he recounts:

From every part of the nation people had come to observe the great treason trial, and all agreed that it was better than any theatre; for as even the most ignorant backwoodsman knew, at issue was a struggle to the death between the President and the Supreme Court, between nationalists and separatists, between Jefferson and Burr who at even this late date

¹⁴ Arthur Meier Schlesinger Jr., *The imperial presidency* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin 1973) 376.

¹⁵ Poirier, 'The heart has its treasons', *The Washington Post*.

¹⁶ Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, 'Books of the times: Back to the first principles', *The New York Times*, Oct. 25 1973, via ProQuest Historical Newspapers Database <<http://search.proquest.com>>.

¹⁷ Philip Toynee, 'An ambiguous hero', *The Observer*, Mar. 24, 1974, via ProQuest Historical Newspapers Database <<http://search.proquest.com>>.

¹⁸ *Filibuster: In the 19th century sense of the word: a private army.

¹⁹ Boyer et al., *The enduring vision*, 475-476.

²⁰ Vidal, *Burr*, 482-483.

was still a hero to the New England Federalists and might have been able – had I so wished – to lead that part of the country in a revival of the now moribund Federalist party.²¹

The relevance of the Burr case and, by logical interference, the novel *Burr*, for the Watergate-era is quite palpable here. In scholarly articles and books, this has been noticed for the largest part by lawyers, and mostly in hindsight. *The Minnesota Law Review* dedicated almost their whole fifth issue of 1999 to the articles which had been proposed at their symposium “United States vs Nixon: Presidential Power and Executive Privilege Twenty-Five Years Later.” This symposium took place only half a year after another president had been under attack, and in fact had survived an impeachment vote: Bill Clinton. It is of course understandable, and right, that lawyers and historians react to such events by looking back in time to other impeachments and trials. Moreover, in the cases of *United States v. Nixon* and *Clinton v. Jones*, which followed *United States v. Burr*, the accusing party used the Burr case to establish judicial supremacy over the executive power. 'The Burr trial is worth re-evaluating for more than just historical interest,' John C. Yoo posed in a paper for the symposium. 'Chief Justice Marshall's opinions in *United States v Burr* and President Jefferson's arguments still influence the decisions we make today about executive power and judicial supremacy.'²² As we have seen, *United States v Nixon* gave rise to the idea that *Burr* stands for judicial supremacy in disputes between the judiciary and the executive. Later cases, most notably *Clinton v. Jones*, have followed the Nixon court case's misreading of *United States v. Burr*.²³ Without taking further recourse into more legal hair-splitting it can safely be established from Yoo's article that 1) executive privilege was an important issue in the Burr trial, 2) that the trial did not resolve this problem, but that Judge Marshall tried to work around it by meeting Jefferson halfway. And, 3) that in private, Jefferson had very fixed opinions on the matter: namely that the President *did* have executive privilege in refusing to serve a *subpoena duces tecum*, when the President's duties needed all of his attention.²⁴ Marshall agreed on this. On one account, in a letter to his counsel Hay, Jefferson took this much farther, (see²⁵) but Yoo sees this as purely 'blowing off some steam,' and in private too.²⁶ Jefferson's public actions, after all, were not always concurrent with his private opinions. In other court cases, which used the Burr case in their defence, the latter have sometimes been confused with the former, according to Yoo.²⁷

Yoo's article sheds a lot of light on the intricacies of the Burr trial, and gives much-needed nuances to the way in which the court dealt with Jefferson's claims of presidential privilege, which later have been understood to be a plea for blanket constitutional immunity. As Yoo demonstrates, the matter was not so straightforward. However, looking at the footnotes of his work, one can tell that much of Yoo's work was based on Jefferson's letters. The article does not show Burr's side of the argument at all and is biased in favour of Jefferson: 'Jefferson', he writes, 'realized that Burr was attempting to manipulate the branches in order to derail his treason trial [...]'²⁸ This quote, taken from another one of Jefferson's letters, is not backed up by any other proof. Jefferson's word, it seems, suffices. It is plain to see that this a partisan statement. Moreover, the article does not say that Burr was acquitted, and rightfully so; it was quite certain that he planned something in the west, but there was not sufficient proof to convict him. So, although Yoo's article gives much needed clarity

²¹ Ibidem, 490.

²² Yoo, 'The first claim: The Burr trial, *United States v. Nixon*, and Presidential Power', *The Minnesota Law Review*. Vol. 83. p. 1463.

²³ Yoo, 'The first claim', 1463.

²⁴ A critical note by Yoo: “Jefferson's claim of residential inconvenience was a reduction ad absurdum argument, not a plea for blanket constitutional immunity. Jefferson himself, it appears, did not even believe his own hypothetical argument. He immediately complied with the subpoena and never sought to resist a judicial order on the ground that official business was unremitting.” Yoo, 1467.

²⁵ Jefferson to his council Hay: “As I do not believe that the district courts have a power *commanding* the executive government to abandon superior duties & attend on them, at whatever distance, I am unwilling, by any notice of the subpoena, to set a precedent which might sanction a proceeding so preposterous.” Yoo, 'The first claim', 1462.

²⁶ Yoo, 'The first claim', 1465.

²⁷ Ibidem, 1468.

²⁸ Ibidem, 1473.

regarding the Burr trial and the subpoena against Jefferson, it also shows that perhaps academia have been somewhat unkind to Aaron Burr.

Now then, back to the question that matters most: where does Nixon come in? As one will have gathered from all of the above, Nixon does not figure in the actual story. Up until now, we have merely established that in trial, Nixon produced an argument similar to the one made by Jefferson in 1807, and both were Presidents when they did so. In short, this is a kind of *United States v Nixon* avant la lettre, and the equation cannot go much further than that. Therefore, the next best question to ask would be: are any of the characters particularly similar to Nixon? In answering this question, one needs to keep in mind that Vidal disliked Nixon immensely, and in fact had fictionalised Nixon before. He did so in his play *The Best Man*, about the 1960 democratic primaries, and in the play *An Evening with Richard Nixon* (1972). The latter is a kind of summary of Nixon's career so far, commented upon by George Washington, Dwight Eisenhower and John F. Kennedy, and mostly consists of citations. Gore Vidal writes: 'The idea for *An Evening with Richard Nixon* came to me after much brooding on the national amnesia. I decided that I would put in a single two-hour *entertainment* the thirty-seventh President's career, using his own words – and those of others. At the end of this narrative, it won't be possible for anyone to say, 'Oh, I'm sure he never said that about China, or Truman, or price controls' – or 'compared his invasion of Cambodia with the Soviet's invasion of Czechoslovakia.'²⁹ Towards the end of the end of the book, Kennedy, Eisenhower and Washington wonder about the consistency of Nixon's career and Nixon's journey to China. Washington concludes: 'It would seem to me that the only thing which consistently interests him is running for office and getting elected.'³⁰ This is doubly insulting because *George Washington*, the father of the nation, says it.

Apart from being a novelist and a playwright Vidal was also a very skilled essayist. He wrote at least one essay about Nixon, in relation to his own work, called "Richard Nixon: Not *The Best Man's Best Man*," written in 1984. Some have argued that in fact Vidal's essays, and not his novels, were his best works, and that he was most useful and perceptive in his journalistic endeavours.³¹ He describes Nixon as the most nearly autonomous and, therefore, the most unpredictable of all of his literary inventions.³² 'Needless to say, I cannot stop following the adventures of my invention ... *my invention!*' Vidal writes. The essay ends with cautious praise for Nixon as the president who 'went to Peking and Moscow in order to demonstrate to all the world the absolute necessity of coexistence.'³³ The essay, as well as his two plays, demonstrate Vidal's long-time interest in Nixon – as opposed to, for instance, that of Philip Roth, which only lasted one book. In his essay, Vidal explains the American hatred of Nixon as follows:

To understand Nixon's career you would have to understand the United States in the twentieth century, and that is something that our educational, political and media establishments are not about to help us do. After all: No myth, no nation. They have a vested interest in maintaining our ignorance, and that is why we are currently stuck with the peculiar notion that Nixon just happened to be the one bad apple in a splendid barrel. The fact that there has not been a good or serious president since Franklin Roosevelt is ignored, while the fact that Nixon was corrupt some of the time, and complex and devious all of the time, is constantly emphasized in order to make him appear uniquely sleazy – and the rest of us just grand.³⁴

According to Vidal, scapegoating Nixon is part of the larger pattern of mythologising the United States. And myths need bad guys too. 'Yet Nixon is hardly atypical,' writes Vidal. 'Certainly his

²⁹ Gore Vidal, *An evening with Richard Nixon* (New York, Random House 1972) blurb.

³⁰ Ibidem, 131.

³¹ Daniel Luzer, 'The apotheosis of Gore Vidal', on *Ten Miles Square – by the Staff and Friends of the Washington Monthly*. <www.washingtonmonthly.com> Accessed 29 January 2013.

³² Gore Vidal, 'Richard Nixon: Not *The Best Man's Best Man*' in *Armageddon? Essays 1983-1987* (London: André Deutsch 1987) 63.

³³ Vidal, 'Not *The Best Man's Best Man*', 68.

³⁴ Ibidem, 64-65.

predecessor, Lyndon Johnson, far surpassed Nixon when it came to mendacity and corruption.(...) Actually, corruption has been more the rule than the exception in our political life.³⁵ These statements are in agreement with the way in which Vidal deals with what he calls the 'American pantheon': one of *Burr's* striking aspects is that 'gods', such as George Washington, are humbled and taken down from their pedestals.

Conversely, Vidal calls Nixon 'the only great president of the last half of the twentieth century,' because Nixon realised that 'the United States is just one country among many countries and that communism is an economic and political system without much to recommend it at the moment and with few voluntary adherents. (...) Simultaneously Nixon realized that coexistence with the Soviet Union is the only game that we can safely play.'³⁶ In short, Nixon did not believe in American exceptionalism, unlike, say, George Bush. However, the myth that the United States is somehow different, exceptional, is still the prevailing myth. A myth that, or so it seems from the above, Vidal does not at all agree with, but without which the United States would lose much of its (cultural) power. According to Vidal, then, Nixon – a scapegoat just like Burr – deserves praise for promoting 'the absolute necessity of co-existence' and therefore for preventing a nuclear war. But to praise Nixon would be *against* vested interests, argues Vidal, and that is why almost nobody does so (except for Vidal, who does not care much for vested interests). So, as a result, Vidal's pantheon of American gods, if at all existent, is not of the same kind as the one teachers teach in high school. It is clear in his essay that Vidal believes that leaders, good and bad, including Nixon, are produced by the nation. 'He [Nixon] is ours in a way that the queen is not England's, because she was invented by history, while Nixon made himself up, with a lot of help from all of us. As individuals,' Vidal writes, 'the presidents are accidental; but as types, they are inevitable and represent, God help us, us. We are Nixon; he is us.'³⁷ So, when the public despises Nixon, according to Vidal, what they really do is look into a kind of mirror that betrays their own faults to them.³⁸

But let us return to the book, and the way it deals with one of the members of the 'American pantheon': Thomas Jefferson. Of all of the characters in *Burr*, the fictional Thomas Jefferson is most similar to the real-life Richard Nixon. There are too many parallels for it to be a coincidence. Apart from the trial, Vidal also highlights Jefferson's compulsive lying, dishonesty and deviousness, as well as Jefferson's contempt for the press. Where Nixon, in his early days, accused all of his political enemies of being closeted communists, Jefferson, in the book, accuses all of his rivals of being royalists, and of wanting to tax everything and everybody.³⁹ Moreover, there is the shifty gaze: 'Incidentally, Jefferson had the shiftest gaze of any man I have ever known.'⁴⁰ Nixon, too, had a shifty gaze. That, together with Nixon's voice, the protruding jawls, Nixon's profuse sweating, his five o'clock shadow and his stock phrases were the Nixon-characteristics which were easiest to parody. Furthermore, Jefferson complains of the press to Burr several times, and even contemplates having a couple of bad editors hanged.⁴¹ 'With Jefferson [as with Nixon?] everything was personal; with Freneau, theoretical. Naturally, each appeared to be the opposite to what he was.'⁴² Like Nixon, who also complained bitterly of the press in his 'last press conference of 1962,' the fictional Jefferson took the press personally. They did not care all that much about free speech when they themselves were slandered. Finally, there are the slightly despotic tendencies in Jefferson and Nixon. Nixon had a list of enemies, and a "gang", an inner circle, 'The President's Men', who followed orders blindly, regardless of their ethics. 'There seemed to be a weird, separate morality in the Nixon White House', writes Schlesinger.⁴³ One of the most memorable passages in *Burr* is the

³⁵ Ibidem, 65.

³⁶ Vidal, 'Not *The Best Man's Best Man*', 68.

³⁷ Vidal, 'Not *The Best Man's Best Man*', 64.

³⁸ Ibidem.

³⁹ Vidal, *Burr*, 216, 220, 240.

⁴⁰ Ibidem, 269.

⁴¹ Ibidem, 347.

⁴² Ibidem, 240.

⁴³ Schlesinger Jr., *The Imperial Presidency*, 380.

following:

'On great occasions', announced the scourge of the Sedition Law, 'every good officer must risk himself in going beyond the strict line of law, when the public preservation requires it.' Jefferson then acknowledged the administration's political 'opposition will try to make something of the infringement of liberty by the military arrest and deportation of citizens, but if it does not go beyond such offenders as Swartwout, Bollman, Burr, Blennerhassett, etc., they will be supported by the public approbation.' In other words, if public opinion is not unduly aroused one may safely set aside the Constitution and illegally arrest one's enemies. Had his letter been published at the time, an excellent case might have been made for the impeachment and removal of a president who had broken that oath he had taken to defend and protect the Constitution by conspiring to obstruct and pervert the course of justice.⁴⁴

This speech echoes Nixon's political beliefs and Nixon's crimes: Nixon's belief that on some occasions the President was above the law, as exemplified by the way he dealt with his enemies (for example, Daniel Ellsberg), and the ways in which he abused his power. Nixon, too, obstructed the course of justice, by giving directions to pay hush-money to the four burglars who had been caught during the break-in at the Watergate complex.

Ergo, the popularity of the novel *Burr*. Without Watergate, without the *subpoena duces tecum* issued against Nixon, the book would have been considerably less popular. The fact that the federal government was filing a suit against its own President was such an unusual situation that people immediately looked to the past for explanations. With *Burr* Vidal satisfied part of the demand. Writing a historical novel, as opposed to a biography, Vidal was able to add motives to historical characters and to build parallels with the Nixon era. This makes the book much more exciting than any serious work of history could ever be for the general public. The fictional Thomas Jefferson resembles Nixon in too many ways for it to be just a coincidence. The trial and Jefferson's behaviour in it are the most significant elements. It should be noted, though, that there exists a great deal of misunderstanding about Jefferson's thoughts about presidential privilege – an issue which was brought to the fore by Watergate. Jefferson's private and public opinions were not always the same, and, according to John Yoo, this has led to misreadings in subsequent cases involving the president, such as *United States v Nixon* and *Clinton v Jones*. Thematically, the book is completely in sync with the Nixon era: riots, the abuse of power, a violent press, war, and a sense of fracture in society are all in there. Taking everything into account, one can say that although Nixon and Watergate are not mentioned in the book at all, they *are* there. Nixon did not come out of nowhere to resign over one of the biggest political scandals the U.S.A. had ever witnessed. The country produced him, just as it produced Burr's treason trial, which was one of the first indications of just how much the American presidency would evolve and how imperial it would become.

⁴⁴ Vidal, *Burr*, 475.

Chapter 4: *All the President's Men* (1976) and *The Assassination of Richard Nixon* (2004): Snippets of Nixon

Throughout 1973, it became clearer and clearer that not just CRP, but also the White House had been involved with the dirty tricks campaign that included the failed burglary at the Watergate building. One after another, trusted advisers and aides to the President were implicated. Right from the beginning, *The Washington Post* had been on their tails. The newspaper kept covering the events, even when it seemed, as editor Harry Rosenfelt says in the film, that the whole thing had blown over and there were only five reporters in the country covering the subject.¹ Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward were the two young reporters who wrote the bulk of most of the early Watergate newspaper stories. In 1974 *The Washington Post* received a Pulitzer Prize for its coverage of the Watergate Affair. The book *All the President's Men* and the resulting film by Alan J. Pakula depict the White House as a corrupt and impenetrable fortress, and the film depicts brilliantly the techniques of investigative journalism employed by Woodward and Bernstein. This film views Nixon as an aberration, what Vidal called 'the one bad apple in an otherwise splendid barrel.'²

In *The Assassination of Richard Nixon*, the début of director Niels Mueller, Nixon is the figurehead of a sick and corrupt society. Sam Bicke, an office furniture salesman whose life comes tumbling down after his wife separates from him, is depicted as the victim of this unfair society. He becomes obsessed with Nixon, because Nixon is on television so often. Sam blames Nixon for his misfortunes and decides to kill him by flying an aeroplane into the White House, in a desperate attempt to change his insignificance into glory. He is absolutely convinced that by destroying the seat of government, he will make an important change.

In both Pakula's film and Niels Mueller's *The Assassination of Richard Nixon* little snippets of Nixon's speeches can often be seen on TV or in newspapers, or heard on the radio in the background. Both films have cleverly incorporated these fragments, which are all key moments in American history. The result of this is that Nixon is somehow always hovering in the background. This was a very conscious decision of both directors: in both films President Nixon embodies something larger and more sinister than merely the head of state: in *All the President's Men* Nixon is the corrupt power that needs to be removed, but in *The Assassination of Richard Nixon* he is but the figurehead of a corrupt society. So, ideologically speaking these two films are very far removed from each other. In Mueller's film, the cancer is not on the Presidency, but on society – and the question is, whether the cancer will ever disappear. *All the President's Men*, however, ends with newspaper headlines of the indictments of all the important White House men – implying that once the bad apples had been removed it would be business as usual at the White House.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, a new generation of film directors started producing successful films. Alan J. Pakula was one of them. These directors were different than those of the preceding generations. 'Before anyone realized it, there was a movement – instantly dubbed the New Hollywood in the press.'³ 'The great directors of the studio era, like John Ford and Howard Hawks, regarded themselves as nothing more than hired help (over)paid to manufacture entertainment, storytellers who shunned self-conscious style lest it interfere with the business at hand. New Hollywood directors, on the other hand, were unembarrassed – in many cases rightly so – to assume the mantle of the artist, nor did they shrink from developing personal styles that distinguished their work from that of other directors.'⁴ Another development at this time was what the *New York Times* calls the rise of the 'Hollywood Hyphenate', the type of actor/actress who came up with the idea of

¹ *All the President's Men*, dir. by Allen J. Pakula. (1976; Distributed by Warner Home Video 2006 DVD).

² Vidal, "Richard Nixon: Not *The Best Man's Best Man*, 65

³ Peter Biskind *Easy riders, raging bulls: how the sex 'n' drugs 'n' rock'n'roll generation saved Hollywood* (London: Bloomsbury, 1999) 15.

⁴ Biskind, *Easy riders, raging bulls*, 15.

a film, and subsequently became involved with almost all the different aspects of film-making.⁵ In the case of *All the President's Men*, this was Robert Redford, who participated in the editing, mixing, scoring, advertising and promotion of the film, and produced it. Previously, Redford had been involved in making *The Candidate* (1972), in which he plays a disillusioned presidential candidate, and *Three Days of the Condor* (1975). Both were political films that were critical of the government in one way or another. Redford became interested in Woodward and Bernstein through their newspaper coverage and through a short news magazine profile of them. He realized they were 'classically disparate characters', and became determined to make a movie about the two reporters and their relationship. Only later did Redford become interested in the processes of investigative journalism, and Watergate as the story for a film.⁶ Once Bernstein and Woodward had agreed to sell the rights of the book to Warner Brothers, Redford assembled a crew, with as director Alan J. Pakula, who had previously made *The Parallax View*, another political thriller, Gordon Willis (*The Godfather I, and II*) as photographer, and William Goldman (*Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*) as scriptwriter.

In making the film, Pakula and Redford had to make many difficult decisions concerning the plot. The Watergate Affair, after all, had so many characters, and so many twists and turns that if they had tried to incorporate all of those the film would certainly have become incomprehensible. One of the most interesting decisions they made was to end the film after Nixon's re-election, and update the audience on Nixon's resignation by showing a printing machine that stamps off all of the relevant headlines until August 9, 1974. This way the audience does not witness some of the later triumphs of the *Washington Post*, nor do they witness the two reporters' reactions to Nixon's resignation. In his review for the *Washington Post*, Gary Arnold complains about this discrepancy between the film and the book, and about many other instances in which book and film differ.⁷ This is where the issue of adaptation comes in, and whether the film adaptation of Pakula and Redford was true to the book. According to film critic Brian McFarlane, it would be far more fruitful to ignore this question of fidelity, which is discussed in great detail by Arnold, and instead look at the intertextual relationship between the two works.⁸ According to Christopher Orr, mentioned by McFarlane, 'the issue, within intertextuality, is not whether the adapted film is faithful to its source, but rather how the choice of a specific source and how the approach to that source serve the film.'⁹ The first question is not really applicable here, since Redford had already decided to make the film, before the book was even there, but the second question is relevant. How *did* Pakula and Redford approach their source? 'The decision,' Gussow writes, 'was to focus on the early part of the reporters' investigation. In common with the other films he has produced, *Downhill Racer* and *Jeremiah Johnson*, *All the President's Men* would be, he thought, a 'how-to picture' - how they got the story.'¹⁰ So one gathers that there is a reason for the film's ending: after they have framed John Mitchell, head of CRP and former Attorney General, Woodward and Bernstein know how to do their job, and the audience can count on them to keep on unravelling the conspiracy. Furthermore, Redford says 'I did not want to trivialize the importance of the film, while, at the same time, I did not want to underline its importance with heavy hammer blows or drumbeats.'¹¹ In other words, Redford was afraid to either overstate his case, or to trivialize the message of his film.

What Pakula and Redford eventually ended up with is a political thriller that is visually stunning and remarkably insightful regarding the processes of investigative reporting. The film

⁵ Mel Gussow, 'Redford now a Hollywood hyphenate' *New York Times* (12 April 1976) via ProQuest Historical Newspapers Database <<http://search.proquest.com>>.

⁶ Gussow, 'Redford now a Hollywood hyphenate', *New York Times*.

⁷ Gary Arnold, 'Meticulous ... and Incomplete', *The Washington Post* (4 April 1976) via ProQuest Historical Newspapers Database <<http://search.proquest.com>>.

⁸ Brian McFarlane, excerpt from 'Novel to film: An introduction to the theory of adaption', in Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen *Film Theory and Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press 2009, 7th edition) 387.

⁹ McFarlane, 'Introduction to the theory of adaption', 387-388.

¹⁰ Gussow, 'Redford now a Hollywood hyphenate', *New York Times*.

¹¹ Ibidem.

guides one through the unravelling of Watergate in small, understandable steps, gives the many minor characters just enough details to prevent confusion, but vividly depicts Bernstein, Woodward, Ben Bradlee and Harry Rosenfelt.¹² The dark, paranoid, yet frantic mood is sustained throughout the film, mostly by clever juxtaposition of light and darkness, and a haunting soundtrack. Such strong moods are characteristic of much of Pakula's work.¹³ Emotionally, by today's standards, it can be seen as somewhat flat, and ideologically much more could have been made of it. Or, perhaps, when looking at it from a different perspective, one could say that this is a sign that the director is totally in control of his craft, as Steven Soderbergh said. 'The movie does not race forward', he says. 'There are no action scenes, no big dramatic moments. And the plot frequently deadens into unresolved cul-de-sacs. But the overall effect is thoroughly gripping.'¹⁴ Since, story-wise, the Watergate affair itself was one gigantic maze, it is remarkable that the audience does not get lost in a host of names and events they cannot tell apart. One reason for this is Pakula's use of the a dioptric lense, which has a split focus. This device, which was new at the time, enabled him to focus the lens of the camera on two places at the same time, be it in vertical or horizontal relation. In doing so, however, the crew had to place a vertical or horizontal boundary in between the two focal points, usually a pillar or a desk.*

And this is where Nixon comes in, finally. Throughout the film, the device is frequently used in scenes that take place in the newsroom of the *Washington Post*. One focal point will be on one of the main characters, but the other one will be on, say, a television transmitting one of Nixon's many speeches, or on other reporters discussing news. This way, Nixon is often there, the way that most people saw him in their daily lives: on television. In the Nixon era, news broadcasting channels, such as ABC, CBS and NBC had a considerable impact on people's daily lives. Televisions speeches by the president habitually reached an audience of millions of people. Ever since Checkers, which was watched by 60 million Americans, Nixon had used television to his advantage.¹⁵ He had learned to work with the medium and had learned to avoid disasters such as the first televised presidential debate with John F. Kennedy in 1960, in which Nixon had looked tired and nervous. Roughly 27 million people watched Nixon's first inauguration, and 15 million households tuned in to coverage of the Republican convention of 1968. During his second term, 33 million people watched Nixon's inauguration, and 14,5 million households watched the 1972 Republican convention.¹⁶ Woodward, however, does not watch the renomination of Nixon. While Woodward is slaving away at his typewriter on an article about the audit of CRP's finances, which had been postponed until after the nomination at the Republican convention, the TV transmits footage of the Republican convention. Because Woodward and the television (Nixon) are both facing the camera, and Woodward is not watching TV but works on his article instead, and both are in focus due to the dioptric lense, the suggestion is one of opposition: he does not know it yet, but what Woodward is really working on is Nixon's downfall. At the end of the shot, a triumphant Nixon thanks all of his young supporters for their votes, telling them 'years from now, I hope you can look back and say, it was your best vote' - which is of course highly ironic, since in hindsight it

¹² The film was nominated for 8 Academy Awards, and won three: Best art direction, best sound, and best supporting actor, for Jason Robards, who played Ben Bradlee. See <www.imdb.com>.

¹³ Sara and Tom Pendergast, 'Alan J. Pakula' in *The International Encyclopedia of Films and Filmmakers, part II: directors* (New York, London: St James Press, 2000) 629.

¹⁴ Rick Lyman, 'Watching movies with: Steven Soderbergh. Follow the muse: inspiration to balance lofty and light', *The New York Times* (16 February 2001).

* If you would not have a boundary between the two focal points, it would be very confusing to the eyes, because there would be two different sets of depths to the two focal points.

¹⁵ R.W. Rosenfield, 'A case study in speech criticism: the Nixon-aruman Analog', *Speech Monographs* 35.4 (1968), 436.

¹⁶ The Nielsen Company, 'Presidential inauguration draws 20.6 million viewers', <<http://www.nielsen.com/us/en/newswire/2013/presidential-inauguration-draws-20-6-million-viewers.html>> ; The Nielsen Company, 'Nielsen's pre-convention scorecard', http://www.nielsen.com/content/dam/nielsen/en_us/documents/pdf/Press%20Releases/2008/August/Nielsen%E2%80%99s%20Pre-Convention%20Scorecard.pdf .

could easily have been their worst vote.¹⁷

Throughout the film, radios, front pages of newspapers and televisions are often heard or seen in the background, sometimes in the same way as was mentioned above. They can be seen to have three different functions. First, they give the audience the necessary historical benchmarks. Second, the non-diegetic sounds of radios and televisions make a full length score unnecessary. There is hardly any music in the film, but in those few scenes which are backed up musically the music contributes to the suspense significantly. Third of all, these sounds give the film a high degree of verisimilitude. Since the arrival of television in the 1950s, the main way in which people related to their President and other political figures was through television. The footage shown on TV-sets in the newsroom of the *Post* are all key moments in the politics of that time: Nixon's address to a joint sessions of Congress after his trip to U.S.S.R. and other countries, McGovern's dismissal of Senator Thomas Eagleton*, the GAO convention mentioned already, and, finally, the inauguration of Nixon. In other scenes, the radio transmits press statements of White House press secretary Ronald Siegler and the President's campaign manager Clark McGregor, who says:

Using Innuendo, third-person hearsay, unsubstantiated charges, anonymous sources, and huge scare headlines, the *Post* has maliciously sought to give the appearance of a direct connection between the White House and the Watergate. A charge which the *Post* knows, and half a dozen investigators have found to be false. The hallmark of the *Post* campaign, is hypocrisy, and its celebrated double standard is today made visible for all to see.¹⁸

The result of this use of newspaper headlines and radio and TV footage is a sense of urgency. The odds are really against the reporters, and they have to try their hardest, fighting against the corrupted powers accumulated in both CRP and the White House. They are trying to unravel the ultimate conspiracy, one which goes right to the top. The President, Richard Nixon, becomes the ultimate conspirator. This is articulated very well in the book, which gives hints of it early on: '*Basic strategy that goes all the way to the top.* The phrase unnerved Bernstein. For the first time, he considered the possibility that the President of the United States was the head ratfucker.'¹⁹ Bernstein, understandably, is quite taken aback. Both book and film make occasional references to 'the system' and the Constitution. The general sense, in both the book and the film, is that Watergate was a one-time slip, which was, eventually, accurately handled by 'the system'. After the Senate had voted in Senator Ervins's resolution to allocate money for a select committee, Woodward was exhilarated, because 'The system was showing signs of working.'²⁰ Essentially, this view is historically short-sighted. The film ends with headlines of newspaper articles detailing the impeachment of all of the main Watergate suspects. The suggestion is that Bernstein, Woodward and the rest of the *Washington Post* staff have achieved their goal: they have caught the Attorney General, John Mitchell, and a host of other important men. Viewers know who would be next: the President. The suggestion is that the bad guys are in jail, the system has done its work, and now life goes on. Other than, say, Gore Vidal and Arthur Meier Schlesinger Jr., who consider Nixon as part of a larger historical development, the rise of the imperial presidency, the Watergate affair is seen as an event on its own. To view the system as working would, of course, be the most culturally viable view in a Hollywood film: after all, the Redford/Pakula venture is a commercial enterprise, which probably would not have benefited from expressing harsh cultural criticism. The only criticism is of Nixon and his men. By the time the film appeared these criticisms had become mainstream, and even profitable.

¹⁷ *All the President's Men*, dir. by Allen J. Pakula, 1976.

* It was rumoured in the press that Eagleton had received electroshock treatments for depression and was a sometime alcoholic. McGovern then thought him a liability, after which Eagleton stepped back.

¹⁸ *All the President's Men*, dir. by Allen J. Pakula, 1976.

¹⁹ Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward, *All the President's men* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974) 129.

²⁰ Berstein and Woodward, *All the President's men*, 251.

Lars Mueller's *The Assassination of Richard Nixon* has a view of society which is diametrically opposed to that of *All the President's Men*: America had become unfair and ugly. Nixon was a symptom of a sick, unjust society. The protagonist of *The Assassination of Richard Nixon*, Sam Bick, tries to hijack an airplane to fly it into the White House in order to assassinate Nixon. 'If you destroy the seat of government', he says, 'then you've made a change. A real change.'²¹ During the film, which encompasses the year preceding his attempt, the audience sees how Sam's life slowly falls apart. In the process Sam becomes dissatisfied with his country and blames the government for the harshness he encounters in society. Because the whole film is filmed from Sam's perspective, with the camera continually positioned over his shoulder, the viewer identifies with Sam. Whatever is unfair to Sam is felt to be unfair by the audience. And while there is a degree of self-pity in Sam's behaviour, one still feels that he is indeed the victim of an unjust society. 'I just, I try to keep my family together', he says. 'And that little guy can't do it any more. He can't do it. He just can't do it any more, because there is a cancer in the system. The whole system has a cancer and I'm being punished because I resist. Somebody has to resist, just somebody has to resist.'²² The phrase 'cancer within the presidency' was first used by John Dean III, when he came to warn the President about Watergate.²³ Sam's angst slowly transforms into rage, and the target of that rage is Richard Nixon, with whom, like many other Americans, Sam's only relation is through television.²⁴

Sam, in fact, becomes obsessed with President Nixon. As in *All the President's Men*, TV-footage of Nixon and of other important events is depicted very often. The film opens with slow-motion shots of Nixon speaking very persuasively from behind a lectern, and Sam's words 'tell them that. Tell them my reasons. Tell them why. End of tape 4, February 22nd, 1974.' These words have been taped on a voice recorder and will be sent to Leonard Bernstein in a big brown envelope. In the next shot, we see a razor lying on a dashboard of a car, and subsequently we see someone using the razor. In the background, the car radio emits news which is barely audible, except for the words 'Republican candidate' and 'Watergate.' Sam, we learn, is having his last shave before entering the airport. Throughout the film the audience hears little snippets of Watergate coverage through the radio and once sees footage of the Ervin Committee questioning McGruder. Other images are David Hillard of the Black Panther Party speaking, the assassination attempt on Governor George Wallace of Alabama, news coverage of the demonstrations at Wounded Knee, South Dakota; Nixon saying 'I'm not a crook', and Nixon saying 'that key is in your hands. Every action I have taken tonight is designed to help us snap out of this self-doubt, this self-disparagement, that saps our energies.' All of these snippets either show Nixon's duplicity (e.g. the last two statements above), or show people who somehow inspire Sam to do his deed. During the film, Sam and Nixon become curiously mirrored: both men have very strict morals, both are nevertheless dishonest and, in the end, both prove to be failures. It is not a coincidence that Sam chooses Nixon as his target: in killing someone like himself, he tries to turn his self-loathing into something else – a heroic deed which he hopes he will be remembered for in history. However, Sam fails at this too, and is condemned to being a mere footnote in the history of political assassinations.²⁵

One way to measure the quality of a country's culture is the way in which it deals with

²¹ *The assassination of Richard Nixon*, dir. Niels Mueller (2004; Metrodome Distribution Ltd., 2005 DVD).

²² *The assassination of Richard Nixon*, dir. Niels Mueller, 2004.

²³ 'Cancer on the Presidency' conversation transcript, p. 5. President Nixon and Counsel to the President John Dean III. March 21, 1973. The Nixon Library. www.nixonlibrary.gov Accessed on 24 February 2013.

John Dean III: "I think, I think that, uh, there's no doubt about the seriousness of the problem we're, we've got. We have a cancer--within, close to the Presidency, that's growing. It's growing daily. It's compounding, it grows geometrically now because it compounds itself. Uh, that'll be clear as I explain you know, some of the details, uh, of why it is, and it basically is because (1) we're being blackmailed; (2) uh, people are going to start perjuring themselves very quickly that have not had to perjure themselves to protect other people and the like. And that is just--and there is no assurance--"

President: "That it won't bust." Dean: "That that won't bust." President: "True."

²⁴ Th!nk Film 'The Assassination of Richard Nixon', information Booklet supplied by Th!nk Film UK (2005) via Google Scholar, 12.

²⁵ Information Booklet supplied by Th!nk Film UK, 8.

people who have somehow failed at life. The U.S.A. has a capitalist, free-market economy, with only a very thin safety net for those who cannot participate or fail to participate in its highly competitive system. Generally speaking, the American system is not particularly friendly towards people who have somehow failed at life, and the pervasive myth of 'The American Dream' has proved a let-down to many. Once Sam has failed in one thing, his marriage, everything goes downhill for him. While his own disposition is partly to blame for it, one does not get the impression that Sam's downfall is entirely his own fault: he wants to earn an honest living, he wants to have moral standards, but it is just impossible, because his way of thinking somehow does not combine well with American capitalism. Sam says that he does not want to lie to earn his living, that he does not want to drop his principles. At the same time, however, Sam, too, lies: to his boss, to his brother and to his wife. Sam, in fact, has the same kind of duplicity as Richard Nixon. Nevertheless the sympathy of the audience lies with Sam. After all, Sam is the protagonist and somewhat of an underdog. Moreover, Sam does not achieve much with his lies. His desperate lies only make him more pathetic and more deserving of the viewers' sympathy, while Nixon's lies helped him gain a landslide victory in the 1972 presidential elections. Nixon abused his power, while Sam did not have any power to abuse. Sam is powerless against a system which simply does not work for him, and which has Nixon as its head.

Another way to measure a system is to look at its leaders. A country, it is said, gets the leader it deserves. If Nixon's White House had become a criminal gang, by deduction, this says as much about the state the country was in as it does about the Nixon White House. The film suggests that Sam was created by the violent, corrupt society he was living in. It does not condone Sam's horrendous deed, but it explains it. Typically, this was not appreciated by all film critics: 'In the end "The Assassination of Richard Nixon" feels more like 'The Assassination of Joe, the Average Viewer.' It grinds on and on without mercy. You're in the cross hairs. There is no escape. Where is that Secret Service when you need it?' writes *Washington Post* reviewer Stephen Hunter.²⁶ In short, the film is bleak, haunting and confrontational. But the average Joe does not want to be confronted with his own shortcomings, or with life's unfairness – he wants to be entertained. This film expresses heavy criticism by having as its protagonist somebody who rebels against the American system and its head, President Nixon. The fact that his rebellion does not end so well makes it even more painful and makes it quite hard to stomach for, among others, reviewer Stephen Hunter. And while the notion of success is very well-ingrained in all aspects of American culture, failure, perhaps, is less so. Most of all, *The Assassination of Nixon* is a film about failure. In a society mostly oriented towards success and material rewards, failure is disregarded, and there is no attention for other kinds of success. Once one thing has gone wrong for Sam, he finds himself on an increasingly slippery slope: Nobody makes an effort to offer Sam the helping hand he needs. If only they had, the film suggests, Sam might have never made his desperate attempt.

These two films are very different, but they have one thing in common: Nixon is everywhere. He is on television, on the radio and in the newspapers. Nixon looms large in many a scene, also in other films, such as *The Ice Storm*, in which the political disintegration of the Watergate Affair is accompanied by familial disintegration and changing sexual morals.²⁷ Both *All the President's Men* and *The Assassination of Richard Nixon* use TV- and radio footage to give historical benchmarks, but also use it to accentuate Nixon's power. In both films, the protagonists are up against The White House. Woodward and Bernstein try to unravel the Watergate cover-up, while powerful people try to stop them. Eventually, however, the system does its work: Nixon's men are indicted, and finally Nixon resigns. Journalism and the judiciary get the job done.

Sam Bick, however, is up against the White House in an entirely different capacity: he wants to cure society, and to do so he intends to kill the President. Nixon is the nation's head of lies, and

²⁶ Stephen Hunter, 'Overkill with Sean Penn', *The Washington Post*, (21 January 2005) <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A25246-2005Jan20.html>>.

²⁷ *The Ice Storm*, dir. Ang Lee (1997: Twentieth Century Fox).

everybody else seems to have followed him in his dishonest behaviour. Sam tries to live an honest life, but is, and more importantly *feels* thwarted in every aspect of it. Everyone around him seems to be lying. Sam ends up all alone and spirals down into madness as a result, which in turn leads to his attempt assassinate the President. Because Sam Bick is not special in any way, just an average working American with a wife, two children and a house, the suggestion is that Sam could have been anyone; any American could have snapped in this way. Thus, the film expresses severe criticism of a dishonest, sick society.

Possibly because of this, *All the President's Men* is taught at universities and remains successful, while *The Assassination of Richard Nixon* is still a relatively unknown film. The latter's message is by far not as attractive as that of the former: to believe that David can beat Goliath is a by far more of an attractive paradigm than to believe that society creates its own political assassins – of which the U.S.A. had its fair share in the tumultuous 1960s and 1970s.

Chapter 5: Flawed, but Human: Nixon in Robert Altman's *Secret Honor* (1984) and Oliver Stone's *Nixon* (1996)

'The real war is in us. History is the symptom of our disease.'

(Mao Tse-tung in *Nixon*)¹

During Richard Nixon's presidency the belief Americans had in their own political system got severely damaged. Many held Nixon held responsible for both the Watergate Affair, which caused widespread disillusionment with the government and its institutions, and for the social and political turmoil of the late 1960s and early 1970s in general. And because Nixon was the man at the top, he had to bear the burden of this responsibility. After all, no other president had ever resigned before. Increasingly, directors, writers and playwrights looked towards Nixon's own character, his drives, and his humble origins to explain Nixon's rise and fall. No longer was Nixon simply blamed for all that had gone astray in a very turbulent era. Instead, the former President himself was turned inside out, re-examined, and even compared to Hamlet, as in Robert Altman's *Secret Honor*. Anger aimed at Nixon slowly turned into fascination, and, moreover, a desire for reconciliation with the more ugly events of the past, as is most obvious in Oliver Stone's *Nixon*.

Nixon was a distrustful and guarded man. He was also an opportunist, so people did not always trust him. The distrust, opportunism and calculation often made people doubt the official, presidential version of the truth. Instead, they came up with their own theories – conspiracy theories. Both *Nixon* and *Secret Honor* suggest that Nixon's rise and fall were inevitable due to bigger and more sinister forces than merely Nixon's appeal to the electorate and his tremendous drive for success. In Oliver Stone's *Nixon* the infringement of the Military Industrial Complex (the M.I.C. or 'the beast') is blamed for Nixon's resignation and for John F. Kennedy's assassination. Robert Altman's *Secret Honour* blames the infringement of big business, under the guise of the 'Club of 100.' And while both these explanations are dubious, they go a long way in explaining the distrust people felt towards 'Tricky Dick'.

In order to facilitate the discussion of the films, let us return to Richard Nixon himself for a moment and make some observations upon his character. So far Nixon's political career has been discussed, but hardly any attention has been given to his person. Why did he become 'Tricky Dick': distrustful, devious and, at times, paranoid? Richard Milhous Nixon was born on January 9, 1913, in Yorba Linda, California. His parents Frank and Hannah, who were Quakers, were both very strict. The family had to work hard to get by on their lemon ranch, but they were happy and they did not feel poor. Richard Nixon was a quiet and very clever boy, who looked up to his older brothers and who had an obvious competitive streak. He enjoyed playing sports, but really excelled in mental activities. People were amazed by his ability to memorize, by the interest he took in national politics, and by his knowledge about and understanding of public issues.² He was shy and reserved when speaking to someone alone or in a small group, but when he had to speak in front of a large audience, such as the congregation at Church, all his shyness disappeared. Throughout his adult life, he bottled up his emotions, in direct contrast to his father, who loudly expressed his personal feelings on every possible occasion, but in direct conformity with his mother's ways. Many of his attitudes came from Frank's dual role as father and Sunday-school teacher. What Frank preached was a simple doctrine; as his son later summed it up, it was 'that in America, with hard work and determination a man can achieve anything.'³ Of course this sounds very familiar: it is the American Dream. 'I'm not a quitter,' Nixon would say in his resignation speech, and generally he was not. He had great perseverance and he did accomplish great things – and some bad things. While Nixon loved to perform in public, he was also very sensitive to criticism. This is somewhat contradictory:

¹ *Nixon*, dir. Oliver Stone (1996; distributed by Entertainment in Video, DVD).

² Ambrose *Nixon 1913-1962*, 21-30.

³ *Ibidem*, 31.

if he did not like to be criticized, then why would he put himself in a position in which that would surely happen? Nixon had another strange character trait, in that he was unable to trust almost anyone apart from his mother and his brothers Harold and Donald. He was not abused in his youth, so there does not seem to be any cause for such behaviour. The two biggest traumas Nixon experienced in his youth were the death of two of his brothers. First Arthur, who died suddenly from a mysterious disease, and then Harold, who died from tuberculosis.⁴ Some have hinted that Nixon suffered from survivor's guilt and felt immensely pushed to please his parents in every possible way.⁵ Throughout his youth Nixon continued to excel in school, and eventually he got a scholarship to the prestigious Duke Law School. When he graduated from Duke he returned to Whittier, to which he and his parents had moved from Yorba Linda. He married Pat and began to practice law.

In 1948, as can be read in the chapter 'historical backgrounds,' Nixon became a delegate in the House of Representatives, which was the start of a long and mostly successful political career. Although Nixon had great abilities he was somewhat socially awkward and very insecure, especially so with people from the North-East who had had a privileged upbringing. Throughout his career he blamed the East Coast establishment for all kinds of things, but most of all for bad press coverage. Henry Kissinger, a Harvard professor and Nixon's colleague and friend, was perhaps the exception to the rule. But of course, one could see Kissinger, with his pronounced German accent (always a great laugh in films) as an outsider too. Nixon's character, then, was full of contradictions: He was a born leader who loved public speaking, but who was sensitive to criticism and trusted almost nobody. More often than not Nixon's political enemies became his personal enemies too. He used dirty tricks and slander against these enemies, mostly during his earlier campaigns, and also during his re-election campaign of 1972. But when things were the other way around and somebody slandered Nixon, he could not possibly understand why. In private Nixon was a different kind of man, who loved his wife and children dearly. His strict morals and Quaker upbringing did not, however, keep him from bombing Vietnam and Cambodia heavily. (Quakers are pacifists!)

All of the above makes Nixon a fascinating subject: opportunistic and distrustful, but at the same time surprised when others double-crossed him or mistrusted him. He was flawed and contradictory, yet deeply human. And that is exactly how Nixon comes across in Robert Altman's film *Secret Honor* (1984). In this film Nixon dictates his memoirs into a tape-recorder, which, ironically, at first he cannot get to work properly. The film is basically one long soliloquy, in which Nixon spills all of his secrets: about Watergate, about Kissinger and Vietnam, about John F. Kennedy's death and about all kinds of other events and people. The film is fictional and most of all an effort to understand Nixon. To do so even Hamlet is brought in: 'Dr Birdsell, my dramatic coach in school, always said that I was the most melancholy Dane that he had ever directed. [raises hands in a dramatic gesture] "To be, or not. Yes, that is the question all right. Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous Fortune" – [points angrily at the portrait of President Eisenhower] Look, I am not your thinking caddy any more! Everybody used to say that Adlai Stevenson was Hamlet. No, no, that is not true. It was me who was really Hamlet! And Ike was the King! I never even got to see all the rooms in the White House until Johnson got to be President!⁶ Richard Nixon as the Hamlet of the White House, with Eisenhower as the usurper – who would have thought? It is not at all such a strange thought, though, considering that Eisenhower refused to give Nixon responsibilities for anything of importance.* It reminds one of King Claudius' decision to send Hamlet to England after he has accidentally murdered Polonius (instead of Claudius), just to get rid of him.⁷ Overall the film is remarkably sympathetic towards

⁴ Ambrose *Nixon 1913-1962*, 41,57.

⁵ *Ibidem*, 42,57.

⁶ *Secret Honor*, dir. Robert Altman. (1984, Sandcastle 5 Production) Viewed via <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B97TNpu_csc> Accessed 26 March 2013.

* See the paragraph on Nixon's visit of the USSR in the 'historical backgrounds': The diplomatic results of the trip, however, were questionable, as no agreements of any kind had been reached, since Eisenhower had told Nixon not to interfere and had reminded Nixon that he was "not a normal part of the negotiating machinery."

⁷ William Shakespeare. *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* (1604) (London: Penguin Books 1978).

Nixon. Film Critic Roger Ebert, who has won a Pulitzer Prize for his film writing, wrote: 'A strange thing happened to me as I watched this film. I knew it was fiction. I didn't approach it in the spirit of learning "the truth about Nixon." But as a movie, it created a deeper truth, an artistic truth, and after *Secret Honor* was over, you know what? I had a deeper sympathy for Richard Nixon than I have ever had before.'⁸ If we take into account that Ebert wrote this review in 1984, barely ten years after Nixon's resignation, this is remarkable. Philip Baker Hall's alternatively raging, scared and vulnerable performance of Nixon is convincing, but could, as Mark Deming writes, possibly make one hate Nixon even more.⁹ After all, he seems so strange – maybe even mentally unstable or deranged – that one could wonder why (if this film had been reality) Nixon ever became president at all.

Robert Altman's film is not necessarily historically accurate in this respect, and does not claim to be so (see the disclaimer at the start of the film¹⁰). Nevertheless, a great deal of the fictional Nixon's recollections are still accurate. *Secret Honor* (like Oliver Stone's *Nixon*) is perhaps more *culturally* correct: Nixon's mental health was a subject of much speculation among the general public. Americans wondered whether Nixon's personal demons had unleashed Watergate. Conjectures such as these, David Greenberg argues, do not generally find their way into books written by professional historians. But they should, Greenberg argues, because they are as revealing about Nixon's presidency as the laws he pushed through Congress.¹¹ Many people had an ambivalent attitude towards Nixon: they thought he was a good politician, they liked his policies, they voted for him, and yet they did not trust him. But that did not mean that Republicans would walk over to the Democrats. Moreover, Presidents of the U.S.A are of high symbolic value, and the relationship that Americans have with the President of a certain era is as important in making meaning out of the past as the confirmation of certain laws are. And, where somebody like Pat Nixon might not be all that interesting to historians, she is still a part of the Nixon administration, just as Jackie Kennedy was for the Kennedy administration. Writer Ann Beattie, a short story writer and professor of literature and creative writing at the University of Virginia, even wrote a 'fictional memoir' for Pat Nixon.¹² After having done the necessary research to do so, Beattie imagines Pat's life and how she must have felt at certain key moments.¹³

Conspiracy theories can be thought of as having the same kind of cultural value: not the theories themselves (they are mostly nonsensical) but people's attitudes towards them are of interest. They arise when the official version of the truth is somehow not believable. With Nixon, who was devious and calculating, one never knew just exactly what he was up to or what ulterior motives he had, and whether he spoke the truth. When Oliver Stone poses that Nixon was somehow responsible for the assassination of John F. Kennedy because Nixon set up 'Track 2,' (secret plans to kill Fidel Castro that somehow backfired on Kennedy) he truly taps into the darker undercurrents of society. He calls those undercurrents 'the Beast', interpretable as the Military Industrial Complex (M.I.C.) first signalled by President Dwight D. Eisenhower in his out of office speech.¹⁴ The thought that the M.I.C., which included the FBI and CIA who sometimes 'went off on their own,' is powerful enough to kill a President signals a certain attitude towards these agencies and their close

⁸ Roger Ebert, 'Secret Honor' review in *The Chicago Sun-Times*. (1 January 1984) <<http://rogerebert.suntimes.com>>.

⁹ Mark Deming, 'Review summary' for Rovi, "Secret Honor Overview", the *New York Times* website. <<http://movies.nytimes.com/movie/43461/Secret-Honor/overview>> Accessed 26 March 2013.

¹⁰ Disclaimer: "This work is a fictional meditation the character of and events in the history of Richard M. Nixon, who is impersonated in this film. The dramatist's imagination has created some fictional events in an attempt to illuminate the character of President Nixon. This film is not a work of history or a historical recreation. It is a work of fiction, using as a fictional character a real person, President Richard M. Nixon – in an attempt to understand."

¹¹ David Greenberg, 'Richard the bleeding hearted', *Reviews in American History*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (March 2002) 156-167.

¹² Pat Nixon is the only first lady who never wrote a memoir about her time in the White House. She fell ill shortly after Nixon's resignation and never recovered sufficiently to write a memoir.

¹³ Ann Beattie, *Mrs Nixon: A novelist imagines a life*. (New York: Simon & Schuster 2011).

¹⁴ Dwight D. Eisenhower, 'Out of Office Speech' (17 January 1971) <<http://coursesa.matrix.msu.edu/~hst306/documents/indust.html>> .

ties to the defence industry, and towards the federal government in general.¹⁵ Whether Stone really wants the audience to believe this theory or whether he himself believes it is a different matter altogether and will be discussed later on. Furthermore, because this theory makes Nixon somehow complicit in Kennedy's death, it once again reaffirms the somewhat shady image of Richard Nixon.

According to *Secret Honor* 'the Club of 100', a group of Californian businessmen that helped to start up Nixon's political career by backing him up financially in return for political favours, pressured Nixon to stay in Vietnam until 1976, because they were making millions from the Vietnam War. According to the film Nixon agreed to this against his better judgement, because they would back him up during the elections. Nixon says that in agreeing to pair up with the 'Club of 100' he sold his soul to the devil, suffered gravely because of it, and eventually had to give up the Presidency when he wanted to withdraw from Vietnam earlier than agreed. The 'Club of 100,' Nixon says, were much bigger fish than anyone in the White House, including himself.¹⁶ When Nixon resigned, the film implies, this was to make sure that the deal would never come out, because the blood of thousands of American boys had been traded for money – 'a blood bribery.' 'Do you understand what it means if they would catch me? [whispers] It means the firing squad. That's right your Honour. That's what it means.'¹⁷ It is certainly a chilling moment. 'Do you understand then,' Nixon says seconds later, 'why I, the President, had to leave the Congress with the tip of the wrong iceberg? I had to leave a little trail of crimes and misdemeanours for them to follow, so that they wouldn't find out about the treason, and stick me in a cage, like a fucking animal! Like a common criminal.'¹⁸

As with Stone, such historical concoctions had best not be seen as accurate representations of reality, but should be seen as the way the film represents certain attitudes towards the infringement of big business upon politics, and, in the case of *Secret Honor*, upon Nixon's own policies. 'Your Honour', Nixon (acting as his own lawyer) then continues, 'my client in the dock is guilty of one crime only, and that is being Richard Nixon!' He continues, as himself: 'I just wanted power, that's all. I mean, without power you can't do ...' Then Nixon starts to curse, and talks about power, and power during World War I with the portrait of Woodrow Wilson on the wall of his office in an attempt to defend his own failures. The message is clear: by trying to circumvent the normal path to political power, Nixon got himself into a world trouble. Again, this makes him look rather bad. Daniel Frick, the writer of *Reinventing Nixon*, writes that, due to 'years of hard economic realities for middle-class and poor Americans had severely challenged the myth of success.'¹⁹ Poverty was increasing, the rich were getting richer, and the promise of the American Dream was beginning to sound more and more hollow. The film, Frick argues, is really a 're-creation of the American myth of success as a phantasmagoric nightmare.'²⁰ Nixon became President, but *even then* he is powerless, because in reality he is still a straw man acting on behalf of the Committee of 100. Nixon, in fact, narrates his autobiography as a "recital of failures."²¹ His only success is, paradoxically, his resignation. With his resignation Nixon prevents more bloodshed in Vietnam. This, according to the film, is Nixon's only honourable act. But it has to remain a secret, or else – the fire squad. And therefore his honourable success was no success at all.²² And whether it was in fact honourable is questionable too. After all, if Nixon had not associated with the Club of 100, and had gotten into politics the honest way, he would not have had this problem at all.

After all this candidness, Nixon looks at a portrait of his mother. He feels guilty and confused about who he is. He wanted to be a man, a real man, he says, and then points a revolver at his temple. However, he does not shoot himself but chooses defiance instead. After all, the people

¹⁵ *Nixon*, dir. Oliver Stone, 1996.

¹⁶ *Secret Honor*, dir. Robert Altman, 1984.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹⁹ Daniel Frick, *Reinventing Nixon*, 93.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, 94

²¹ *Ibidem*, 95.

²² *Ibidem*, 96-97.

elected Nixon, time and time again. Even if they did not trust him, they wanted him, he says. 'They said they wouldn't buy a used car from me, but then they gave me the biggest vote in American history. And then they flushed me down the toilet. And they wanted me to stay down. They wanted me to kill myself. Well, I won't do it. If they want me dead, they'll have to do it.' 'Fuck 'em! Fuck'em! Fuck'em!' Nixon shouts, repeatedly and defiantly, while he punches the air. The viewers see this in the four security monitors standing in his office, which are filmed from left to right, and right to left, again and again, until all of it becomes a big blur, and 'Fuck 'em!' becomes a primal scream of frustration and defiance.

In hindsight this ending seems fitting, and it seems to have proved Nixon right. All presidents then still living (Ford, Reagan, Carter, Bush Sr., Clinton) attended his funeral, as well as many other (former) heads of state from all over the world. The newly elected President Bill Clinton delivered a eulogy in which he encouraged Americans to remember what Nixon had done for the United States, besides Watergate.²³ Last February, declassified documents in the Clinton Presidential Library even revealed that Nixon and Clinton had corresponded with each other and had gotten along well. Even though they were of a different political party and philosophy and of a different generation, they felt a special kinship.²⁴ Nixon also secretly counselled Clinton on foreign policy prior to Clinton's '94 trip to Russia. He advised Clinton to make economic aid to Russia contingent on U.S. security interests rather than domestic change, and to warn its leadership for the consequences of slow economic reforms, and military adventurism beyond its borders.²⁵ Clinton appreciated Nixon's advice, and National Security Advisor Sandy Berger recommended that Clinton continue correspondence with Nixon. Each man admired the qualities of the other: Nixon was impressed with Clinton's leadership, and Clinton 'loved the lucidity of Nixon's mind'.²⁶ So during the first two years of the Clinton presidency, Nixon, then ninety years old, had the perseverance and mental agility to start to rehabilitate himself into political life again.

Oliver Stone's film about Nixon's life is a far more complicated production than Robert Altman's rather straightforward one-man show. As a director, Oliver Stone has a very discernible style: stylized, often bombastic and always controversial. Many of his films deal with the era starting with the presidency of John F. Kennedy and ending with that of Richard M. Nixon: *JFK* is about Kennedy; *Platoon* and *Born on the Fourth of July* are about the Vietnam War, and *The Doors* is about the rock group.²⁷ More often than not a political agenda dominates his films. In *Nixon*, however, Nixon is a fully rounded character, and not just a cardboard figure only there to represent certain ideas of Stone.²⁸ The film tells the story of Nixon's life, including his youth and the difficult relationship with his parents, his marriage with Pat, his relationships with his aides and advisers, and attempts to explain Watergate from Nixon's viewpoint. Hanna and Pat Nixon are mostly there to remind the President of his conscience – which Nixon does possess here, but does not possess in other works. The film emphasises Nixon's envy of John F. Kennedy, and suggests (as stated above) that Nixon thought he was somehow responsible for Kennedy's death. We see him, several times, standing in front of a gigantic portrait of Kennedy, musing upon the past. Nixon's feelings of guilt are somehow related to Cuba, and he feared that Watergate, through Howard Hunt, who had Cuban connections, would somehow 'bring up the whole Bay of Pigs thing again.'²⁹ Film critic Roger Ebert

²³ Bill Clinton, 'Eulogy of Richard Nixon' (27 April 1994), <www.youtube.com>.

²⁴ Roger Stone, 'Nixon on Clinton' (28 April 1994), *New York Times*. <<http://www.nytimes.com/1994/04/28/opinion/nixon-on-clinton.html>> .

²⁵ Jonathan Movroydis, 'Declassified national security documents show Clinton sought Nixon's counsel' (15 February 2013) *The Richard Nixon Foundation* <www.nixonfoundation.org>.

²⁶ Movroydis, 'Clinton sought Nixon's counsel', <www.nixonfoundation.org>.

²⁷ The International Movie Database, 'Oliver Stone', <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000231/?ref=sr_1> Accessed 29 March 2013.

²⁸ Robert Brent Toplin, "Oliver Stone" in *The Wiley-Blackwell History of American Film: Volume IV -1976 to the Present*, ed. Cynthia Lucia and Roy Grundmann (Wiley Blackwell 2012), 248-249.

²⁹ *Nixon*, dir. Oliver Stone, 1995.

has compared this to 'Rosebud' in Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane*, in that it is the mysterious driving force that somehow propels Nixon into action.³⁰ The film does make Nixon take the blame for Watergate, but, also acknowledges the existence of a bigger, more sinister force at work: 'the Beast.'

As one perhaps could have guessed, Oliver Stone's treatment of Nixon is somewhat different than that of Robert Altman. Both are sympathetic and both contain speculation and fiction, but Stone's disclaimer is clearly meant to make the film believable: 'This film is a dramatic interpretation of events and characters based on public sources and incomplete historical record. Some scenes and events are presented as composites or have been hypothesized or condensed.'³¹ The first sentence is meant to give the film the appearance of being historically correct. The second sentence is a somewhat euphemistic way of saying that parts of the film are mere speculation. A 'composite' here means that two separate events have been made into a new composite, and 'condensed' means simplified. At the same time Stone's approach to film making can be seen as Postmodern: it incorporates both different media, and different interpretations of Nixon. As a historian, one can have mixed feelings about Stone and his disclaimer: on the one hand, it is admirable that Stone dared to make a sympathetic film about a President who almost everybody loved to hate. But on the other hand, it is clear that his film is in some ways historically inaccurate. It explains Nixon's resignation as preventing other, darker secrets to come out ('the Bay of Pigs thing') and it also misrepresents the roles Bob Halderman and John Ehrlichman played in the Watergate Affair. On some occasions accuracy is simply sacrificed for a smooth-running plot, with 'composites' as a result. As with *Secret Honor* one could still say that overall *Nixon*, artistically, rings true, and that the 'larger truth' is there. Stone got the time frame, most of the details, and, most importantly, Nixon's character right. And since this is not a documentary, but a Hollywood movie and a drama most of all interested in Nixon's character, this is enough. However, Stone's ambiguous attitude towards film-making, illustrated by the following quote, complicates matters:

Stone wants to have it both ways at once without having to reconcile the differences. He both wants get history right and yet he knows that such a task is essentially impossible. Perhaps this is why, in a film such as *JFK*, form seems to be at war with the contents – the razzle-dazzle multiple realities of the montage at odds with the tepid realism of Jim Garrison's home life and the domestic drama about why he doesn't spend more time with his family. Stone's sense that History is not a single story also can run against his notion that it is important to tell the Truth of the past. This dilemma may be why he appears angry in so many interviews about whether his works should be labelled History or Fiction. It is as if he dimly recognizes the dilemma and, stymied by the contradiction, occasionally bursts into verbal violence, saying things like, 'Who knows what history is? It's just a bunch of stories people tell each other around the campfire.'³²

This war between form and content makes the film somewhat hard to judge.

Both films have in common their humane depiction of Nixon, and their explanations for Watergate. Both films put part of the blame on Nixon's character: he has certain Shakespearian flaws, such as his lust for power and glory, his envy of John F. Kennedy, and his inability to trust, that bring him down. Because he wants to stay in power he gives the green light to a campaign of dirty tricks which he knows to be wrong. Because he wants to have 'peace with honour', and the resulting political glory, he draws out the Vietnam War much longer than needed. Because he mistrusts those around him, he gives orders to tap their phones, etcetera. The other part of the blame is put on something beyond Nixon's control: the corrupted power of big businesses, whether related to the defence industry (the M.I.C.) or whether related to Californian big businesses (the Club of 100) to make deals with the government to get what they want – even if this means the death of

³⁰ Roger Ebert 'Nixon' review in the *Chicago Sun-Times*, 20 December 1995. Accessed March 28 <<http://rogerebert.suntimes.com>>.

³¹ Nixon, dir. Oliver Stone, 1995.

³² Robert Brent Toplin, 'Oliver Stone', *The Wiley-Blackwell history of American film: Volume IV -1976 to the Present*, 252.

thousands of young men. Politicians gladly partake in this game because it gives them more power, which is, according to this world view, all that they are after. This, indeed, is a very cynical view, and it displays very little faith in government, or in humanity altogether. It is the same view that cropped up, too, in *The Assassination of Richard Nixon*. Although *Secret Honor* and *Nixon* display an obvious interest in Nixon's character, they do reinvent him to get this cynical message across. Both films accentuate his failures and connect those to the failures of the United States at large: an all-consuming ambition (which Frick calls Faustian), greed, egotism and materialism.³³ His opportunism and deviousness made people distrustful of him, but Nixon himself was paranoid too. This combination of character traits made people suspicious of Nixon and it invited the conspiracy theories mentioned above. Moreover, success had become equal to wealth, where, originally, the ideal of success involved much more, such as social and political success. "Tired of stories suggesting the bankruptcy of treasured national myths" (which is exactly what *Secret Honor* did) Frick writes, "most Americans, in the Reagan era, were happy to enjoy the good times."³⁴ Ten years later, Stone is just as cynical, and just as busy debunking myths and creating other myths. (Hollywood is still one of the biggest myth making machines out there). But contrary to Altman, Stone also accentuates Nixon's search for 'Peace at the centre', a Quaker way of describing success 'within'; fulfilment in all areas of life, and not merely in the material sense.

Was the war *in* Nixon? Was Watergate really the symptom of Nixon's disease, this inner war, as some people thought? Unfortunately one cannot not look inside Nixon's head, and it does not help at all that Nixon was such a guarded and contrived man. Nixon combined opportunism and deviousness with paranoia and distrust of others. During the Watergate days the White House was a fortress, in which everyone suspected each other. All this distrust and paranoia surrounding Nixon proved to be a great breeding ground for conspiracy theories. These theories are used by Oliver Stone and Robert Altman to communicate their cynical world view to their audience. They have connected Nixon's inner struggles with those of the cynical outer world, and they have added some fiction to spice it all up. The result is disconcerting and comforting at the same time. In these films, for once, Nixon is no beast, but a human being, with some of the flaws that naturally come with the package – and then some. The system is the beast. And Nixon, opportunistic as he was, tried to use it to his own advantage. But he failed. And that makes these films all the more harrowing to watch.

³³ Daniel Frick, *Reinventing Richard Nixon*, 98.

³⁴ Daniel Frick, *Reinventing Richard Nixon*, 101.

Chapter 6: Towards a sympathetic depiction: Frost/Nixon(2008)

'When the President does it, it's not illegal. That's what I believe. But I realise that no one else shares that view.' (Nixon in *Frost/Nixon*)¹

As Nixon films go, *Frost/Nixon* is relatively warm, funny and positive in nature. *Frost/Nixon* is by far not as bleak as *Nixon* or *All the President's Men*. The pervasive paranoid, dark atmosphere that characterises other Nixon films is absent. The paranoia in *Frost/Nixon* is only imagined: David and his researchers lock up their research materials in a vault because they think they might be followed, but that is as bad as it gets. There are no sounds of resounding footsteps in the dark, no fears of electronic surveillance – or worse.

In 1978, during the actual *Frost/Nixon* interviews, the grim atmosphere of the late 1960s and early 1970s had abated considerably. These famous interviews were more of an attempt towards reconciliation with Nixon and the past turmoil he represented than the 'the trial Nixon never had', which the film makes it out to be. The ensuing disparity between fact and fiction in the film can be explained in two ways: First, in that this interpretation is used to comment upon the 2006-2008 political climate. At the time, President Bush Jr. was still in power, and he used this power to start an illegitimate war in Iraq. The second explanation for this disparity is that *Frost/Nixon* is in fact, an attempt at making a myth out of the interviews – just as *All the President's Men* mythologised Woodward, Bernstein, Bradlee and the *Washington Post*.

Every country needs its own mythology: shared stories provide a common ground and the heroes of the stories provide the country with ideals. *Frost/Nixon* recasts the story of the interviews as a classic story of David and Goliath, similar to *All the President's Men*. Furthermore, these were *the* famous interviews in which Nixon acknowledged his guilt in the Watergate Affair – that is, as *Frost/Nixon* would have you believe. The film, in fact, so consciously mimics the real interviews, that it is easy to confuse the film with reality. This is what the French post-modern philosopher Jean Baudrillard called hyperreality: a substitution of the signs of the real for the real itself.² As a result the film, which is of course a construct with certain designs upon the viewer, sometimes feels more real than the interview itself did, as happens more often in pop culture.³ The film's actual message is craftily wrapped up in this aura of hyper-reality.

But before we turn to the film, let us first turn to the interviews themselves. Because the interviews reached the largest ever audience for a political interview of this kind, and because this record still has not been broken, one wonders what made the interviews so successful and compelling. First of all, the way David Frost put the show together is of interest. Frost had complete editorial control: Nixon did not know the questions in advance, and he had nothing to say about the editing process after the shooting. Irving 'Swifty' Lazar, Nixon's representative, said to this: 'I think he [Nixon] also realizes that the bona fides of these interviews have to be demonstrable if they are to have any impact at all.'⁴ Lazar talks about bona fides, because he and Nixon saw the interviews as an opportunity for Nixon to get back in the public eye. They thought that Nixon would walk all over Frost. If the public knew that Frost had all of the editorial controls, Nixon's victory would be even bigger and also more believable. Another 'bona fide', however, was the money involved. Nixon was reportedly paid \$600.000 dollars for the interviews, plus a percentage of the profits. The deal was closed on August 9, 1975, exactly one year after Nixon's resignation. Paying for news was seen as unethical, and therefore the big networks (ABC, NBC and CBS) had been unwilling to participate

¹ *Frost/Nixon*, dir. Ron Howard (2008, Universal).

² Martyn Pedler, 'Fake politics for the real America', *Metro Magazine*, issue 160, 182.

³ Jaap Kooijman, *Fabricating the absolute fake. America in contemporary pop culture*. (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press 2008) 70-72. Accessed via DOAB Directory of Open Books. <www.oapen.org>.

⁴ David Frost, *Frost/Nixon. One journalist, one president, one confession*. (London: Macmillan 2007) 7.

in Frost's efforts.⁵ Frost also had difficulties selling the advertisement slots for the program. The project was continuously plagued by financial problems.

Second, the interviews were compelling, because it was David Frost who decided to stage them. David Frost was seen as a 'television personality' and as a talk-show host, and not necessarily as a serious journalist.⁶

His British accent and a pseudo-incisive questioning style gave him an illusory reportorial legitimacy, but we know what he was really after – the showbiz ham in every public figure and the 'marvellous quote,' to borrow one of his most overused phrases, that would serve as an ornamental surrogate for that much-avoided television taboo – substance.

This was written by Tom Shales in his review of Frost's book about the interviews (called *I Gave Them a Sword*, referring to a famous Nixon quote of the interviews⁷) with the apt title 'Frostie the Showman'.⁸ In short, David Frost had much to win with these interviews, because he wanted to improve his reputation. Third, the interviews can be seen as fulfilling the public's need for closure. When the news of the interview first broke, some journalist were incensed:

It appears that former President Richard Nixon has nothing to hide, after all.[...] He has come forward willingly and forthrightly to testify before David Frost over a national television network. [...] Mr Nixon's decision may prove an historical landmark in the development of the law. Hereafter, those accused of an offence, no matter how serious, may reject indictments, true bills and all that antiquated freight, electing instead to appear on any TV show with a rating high enough to claim the public's confidence. [...] In these days of indulgence, who wants to stand trial – even trial by Frost – for less than the million dollar union-minimum?⁹

Obviously, editor Robert Berdiner of the *New York Times* can hardly believe the news. He is angry at Nixon, at Nixon's audacity to appear on national television, prime time, and at the financial gain involved. As Berdiner's editorial shows people were deeply dissatisfied with Nixon's relatively easy escape from the Watergate Affair. Ford had pardoned him, and his only punishment was a lifelong disbarment from national politics, and, perhaps, a health crisis. Nixon was the most controversial politician of the era, and people would be sure to watch the interview. Their curiosity would win it from their disgust.

Now why would Peter Morgan, an English playwright, be interested in an American event that took place over thirty years ago? What interests him, writes John Lahr of the *New Yorker*, is to represent people who are hated. The historical event of the interviews, as Morgan sees it, brings together 'two lonely, disconnected men clamoring for the limelight to complete themselves somehow.' The encounter raises powerful psychological undercurrents. The Nixon he brings on stage is a monument of self-loathing and self-consciousness, a man whose practiced bonhomie only underscores his discomfort in his own skin.¹⁰ Again, the interest in Nixon here is in his person, not in his politics. The fireworks of the play are provided by the pairing of Frost and Nixon. Conspiracy theories, references to the darker undercurrents of society, or to John F. Kennedy's assassination are wholly absent. The reason for that is simple: this film has a positive view of the American system. Nixon is the odd one out. Nixon is the aberration. It is therefore quite logical that the whole film is geared towards an admission of guilt by Nixon. It is what David and his team want the most: to corner Nixon, and to force him into a confession of sorts.

While Nixon did, in reality, acknowledge some of his wrongdoings during the actual

⁵ Associated Press, 'Frost-Nixon interviews', *The Washington Post*, 24 March 1977.

⁶ "Nixon, busy on book, will skip '76 politics". *The Washington Post*, 12 January 1976.

⁷ "Ah, I brought myself down. I gave them a sword. And they stuck it in, and they twisted it with relish. And I guess if I'd been in their position, I'd have done the same thing." David Frost, *Frost/Nixon*, 242.

⁸ Tom Shales, 'Frostie the showman', review of Frost's book 'I gave them a sword' in *The Washington Post*, 12 March 1978.

⁹ Robert Bendiner, 'Why Nixon will tell all to Frost' *The New York Times*, 7 September 1975.

¹⁰ John Lahr, 'Peter Morgan fills in the gaps of history', *The New Yorker*, 4 April 2007.

Frost/Nixon interview, this acknowledgement was by no means as outspoken, emotional and clear-cut as the film portrays it.¹¹ As in *Nixon*, certain scenes are condensed or made into composites. All of the most well-known quotes out of the real interview are lumped together into about ten minutes of film, whereas during the real interviews they were said on separate occasions. The quotes about being a bad butcher (firing Haldeman and Erlichman), 'when the president does it, it is not illegal' and the quote in which Nixon says he let every body down succeed each other quite rapidly. Consequently, Nixon's confession looks much more significant and less ambiguous on the big screen than it did on television.¹² From a historical perspective this is problematic. However, these are the quotes that the interview is remembered for the most, and the film needs them in order to make sense. Nixon's 'confession' ends with the following words, when Frost asks: 'the American people?'

'I let them down. I let down my friends. [softly shaking his head, as in disbelief] I let down my country. And worst of all, I let down our system of government. And the dreams of all those young people that ought to get into government, but now they think "oh, it's all too corrupt" and the rest. Yeah. [sighs] I let the American people down. And I'm going to have to carry that burden with me for the rest of my life. My political life is over.' [Nixon sighs once more. He looks crestfallen.]¹³

Not only is this a fully-fledged apology, it is a very human one too. Nixon's face slowly crumbles, the tone of his voice softens, his eyes grow moist and sad. Langella is a skilled actor, for the viewers see the emotions fly across his face. He is almost too skilled at it, because the real Nixon's face remains considerably more passive during the interviews. So, there you have it: Nixon is cornered into making an apology. This, however, does not make him the bad guy, but it makes him more likeable. If anything, *too* likeable. Christopher Orr, in his review for the *New Republic*, argues that Langella, a tall and charismatic actor, has made Nixon larger than life, when, if anything, the real Nixon was small; not of stature, but in the metaphorical sense.¹⁴ Petty, in Nixon's own words.

According to Orr, the film aims for a sympathetic depiction of Nixon, despite itself, despite the Frost/Nixon interviews and what they represent.¹⁵ This film does not stand alone in its positive depiction of President Nixon: Apparently, according to *Time Magazine*, not only showbiz, but revisionist liberals, too, have started a reappraisal of Nixon. Noam Chomsky called him 'in many respects the last liberal president.'¹⁶ After forty years, perhaps, it seems that one is finally able to look at everything Nixon did while in office, without instant disapproval because of Watergate. 'Any president, even one so rich in inner conflict, is more than the sum of his psychological profile. What he was is less important than what he did in office. And for that many Democrats hated him.'¹⁷ After all, he had passed the Clean Air and Water Acts, established the Environmental Agency, improved the rights of Native Americans, improved social security and welfare and initiated the S.A.L.T. treatments, a détente with the U.S.S.R., and relations with the People's Republic of China. Any Democratic president would have been glad to have such a record.

While Nixon is depicted fairly positively, his wrongdoings still come across well enough. Certain of those wrongdoings invited comparison with the present. During performances of *Frost/Nixon* on Broadway American audiences laughed when Frank Langella offered Nixon's famous justification for abuse of executive power. But they laughed longer, and more revealingly, at the follow-up line: 'But I realise no one else shares that view', in wry recognition that yet another president not only believed such sentiments, but had been acting on them as well.¹⁸ President George Bush's pre-emptive war against Saddam Hussein in Iraq, waged without a UN mandate, was

¹¹ Ron Briley, 'Frost/Nixon', film review in *The Journal of American History*, June 2009.

¹² Richard Corliss, 'When Nixon got Frosted: Capturing history.' *Time Magazine*, 5 December 2008.

¹³ *Frost/Nixon*, dir. Ron Howard, 2009.

¹⁴ Christopher Orr, 'The movie review: *Frost/Nixon*', *The New Republic*, 12 December 2008.

¹⁵ Orr, 'The movie review: *Frost/Nixon*', *The New Republic*.

¹⁶ Corliss, 'When Nixon got Frosted', *Time Magazine*.

¹⁷ Ibidem.

¹⁸ Daniel Frick, *Reinventing Richard Nixon*, 235.

controversial at best, and unnecessary at worst. In 2006, the war in Iraq was in full swing, so it is not surprising that the audience drew these parallels. The Vietnam War was a pre-emptive war too – a war to prevent something believed to be worse than a war: the fall, like dominoes, of all the South-East Asian countries to Communism. Although Nixon cannot be blamed for starting the Vietnam War, he can be blamed for drawing it out for far too long. Furthermore, Bush Jr. too, restricted civil liberties with illegal wiretapping, the Patriot Act, heightened security measures at airports and other public places and the establishment of illegal prison camps. During the aftermath of 9/11 the Justice Department detained hundreds of Middle Easterners living in the United States, some for minor visa violations, and held them without filing charges or even revealing their names.¹⁹ Nixon, too, committed illegal wire-tapping of his political enemies. Some, such as cartoonist Ben Sargent, even wondered who was the real master stonewaller, Nixon or Bush, and thought that Bush would have been able to teach Nixon a thing or two.²⁰ So, although Nixon is depicted more and more positively nowadays, his wrongdoings are not yet forgotten, and they are easily applied to new usurpers such as President Bush Jr. The film, other than the audiences during performances of the play, does not make any conscious connections with President Bush – probably because Peter Morgan, who wrote the play, never meant for that to happen in the first place.²¹

A third, and important underlying issue in *Frost/Nixon* that connects all of the above is the pervading hyper-reality in the film. Great pains have been taken to make the film appear as realistic as possible. The set dresser has tried to make the interview settings look as similar as possible to what they were in 1978, down to the shapes of the leaves of the potted plants.²² To add even more to this semblance of reality, the actors that play James Reston Jr. and John Birch, comment upon the interviews from the near future of the film's time frame. They are portrayed as talking heads, experts upon the matter, and they mostly talk about the media, and the influence the interview had.²³ Martyn Pedler, writing for *Metro Magazine*, sees *Frost/Nixon* as part of a barrage of political films around the 2008 election, including Oliver Stone's *W.* (on George Bush Jr.), Gus van Zandt's *Milk* (on Harvey Milk) and even Zack Snyder's film version of the comic *Watchmen*. All of these films, including *Frost/Nixon*, 'feature well-known actors playing well-known political figures, focus on television as a source of historical truth, and each possesses its own particular (and often peculiar) relationship with reality.'²⁴ As Pedler writes, *Frost/Nixon* was first an interview, on television, then a play, and then a film incorporating some of the original footage, and (fictional) talking heads commenting upon it all, from some kind of fictional future. The close-ups of Nixon's face, both in the real interview and in the film, are extremely powerful. 'Nixon's answers don't matter. The close-up tells all', writes Pedler. 'There's one obvious point that needs to be made. The close-ups aren't of Nixon's face: they're Frank Langella's face.'²⁵ It is, indeed, a rather obvious point, but an important one nonetheless.

Langella (as Nixon) and Sheen (as Frost) are hyper-real. Both Sheen (David Frost) and Langella embody their famous counterparts: they seek to be the visible counterparts of who the audience thinks Nixon and Frost really were. The film fortifies this logic through the use of further impressions: researcher Bob Zelnick (Oliver Platt) does his own 'Nixon' that's all gravelly voice and flapping jowls, and strangers mimic Frost's signature television dialogue incorrectly back at him. Somehow, according to Pedler, these other mimics reinforce the idea that the stars of *Frost/Nixon* must be the 'real thing.'²⁶ This is hyper-reality at its best: the more mediated the image, the more real it feels, paradoxically enough. The paradox is, of course, that mediation should feel as an intrusion,

¹⁹ Boyer et al., *The enduring vision*, 977-980.

²⁰ Daniel Frick, *Reinventing Richard Nixon*, 235-236.

²¹ Peter Morgan, 'I fell for tricky Dick; Why a Brit was inspired to write *Frost/Nixon*'.

²² "Movie Extra's: The real interview" on *Frost/Nixon*, dir. Ron Howard, 2008.

²³ Pedler, 'Fake politics for the real America', *Metro Magazine*, 160.

²⁴ Ibidem.

²⁵ Ibidem.

²⁶ Pedler, 'Fake politics for the real America', *Metro Magazine*, 184.

as something artificial, and so the viewers should be aware of it. Instead, mediated images, such as those in *Frost/Nixon*, feel more real than their originals. Siegfried Kracauer makes the following analogy: a staged film is comparable to a cubist or abstract composition. Instead of staging the given raw material itself, they offer, so to speak, the gist of it.²⁷ One could extend this analogy as follows: the real Frost & Nixon interviews were the raw material, whereas *Frost/Nixon* is the painting, which offers the gist of it. Strangely enough, Kracauer writes, it is entirely possible that a staged real-life event evokes a stronger illusion of reality on the screen than would be the original event if it had been captured directly with the camera.²⁸ Whether this indeed happens, depends on the ability of the director to strike the right balance between realism and artistry, as proposed by Kracauer, but it also depends on one's conception of reality. If, say, *Frost/Nixon* had appeared in 1980, people might not have been ready yet for the film's rather positive depiction of Nixon – they might simply not have believed Frank Langella's performance. In 2008, however, people were more than ready: thirty years after the interview, and just after the Nixon-esque horrors of the presidency of George Bush Jr. interest in Nixon was very significant.

What makes the film even more interesting is its awareness of itself as vehicle in explaining the ability of the media to shape certain stories. The key scene in this respect is the one in which James Reston Jr., as talking head, comments upon the power of the close-ups of Nixon's face:

You know the first and greatest sin or deception in television is that it simplifies. It diminishes great complex ideas, tranches of time – whole careers become reduced to a single snapshot. (...) The rest of the project and its failings would not only be forgotten – they would cease to exist.²⁹

So, according to the film itself, that one single image of Nixon, in which he looks so defeated, guilty, and lonely, meant that Frost had been successful in extracting from Nixon a confession of sorts. That single image, according to the film, portrayed what no one else had gotten Nixon to express: his guilt. By privileging this one image, both Reston and the film itself acknowledge the power of media-constructed images from within the world of *Frost/Nixon*. The film acknowledges the depths and complexity of this process through its own formal construction.³⁰ The fact then, that some parts of *Frost/Nixon* are obviously embellished, exaggerated, or otherwise made more vivid, thus becomes part of the message of the film: the power of the media to make or break people, and the power to mythologise certain stories.

This self-awareness gives the film more weight. There are no hints of such self-awareness in *All the President's Men*, which mythologised Woodward and Bernstein and to a lesser extent, Ben Bradlee. Philip Roth's attacks on Nixon in *Our Gang* are vicious enough, but from a cultural perspective they are not that interesting, because Roth, in his attacks, has taken the easy way out. In *Our Gang* Nixon is simply evil, and Roth is right. In *Frost/Nixon*, Richard Nixon is mostly human. He is, however, not innocent. The film is geared towards an admission of guilt by Nixon, and parallels between Bush Jr. and Nixon were quickly drawn by the audiences of the play during performances on Broadway. The admission of guilt, in the end, proves to be not one of words, but one of emotions, clearly visible on Langella's face. The importance of this single image is overemphasised by the film, but this is done in order to display a larger and more important message: the power of the media. Moreover, the film's urge to be as realistic as possible causes hyper-reality: the film brings across the gist of the real interviews so well, as to feel more real than the actual Frost-Nixon interviews.

In the last scene of the film David and Caroline visit Nixon in Casa Pacifica, his seaside

²⁷ Siegfried Kracauer, 'Basic concepts' in Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen *Film Theory and Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press 2009, 7th edition) 154.

²⁸ Kracauer, 'Basic concepts' in Braudy and Cohen, *Film theory and criticism*, 154.

²⁹ Alexandra Heller-Nicholas, 'David Frost vs. Goliath. History and entertainment in *Frost/Nixon*', *Screen Education*, Winter 2011, Issue 62, 132.

³⁰ Heller-Nicholas, 'David Frost vs. Goliath', 32.

home in California, and give him a pair of Italian loafers, similar to the ones David wore during the interview. 'Thank you,' says Nixon, surprised. 'I'm touched.' He looks somewhat taken aback, but happy. When David and Caroline have turned around to leave, Nixon says 'Oh, David, do you think that I could speak to you in private for a moment?' David complies and turns around. 'You know, those parties of yours, the ones that I read about in all the papers, do you actually enjoy those?' 'Of course', says David, smiling. 'You've got no idea how fortunate that makes you, liking people, and being liked, having that facility, that likeableness, that charm. I don't have it. I never did. It kind of makes you wonder why I chose a life that hinged on being liked. Ha! I'm better suited to a life of thought, debate, intellectual discipline. Maybe we got it wrong. Maybe you should have been a politician, and I the rigorous interviewer.' 'Maybe', says David, smiling, although you can tell by his facial expression that he does not agree. 'David? Did I really call you, that night?' 'Yes.' 'Did we discuss anything, important?' David's face drops and the audience knows that he will tell a white lie. 'Cheeseburgers.' 'Cheeseburgers?' asks Nixon, and he starts to frown. 'Goodbye Sir', says David, and he hastily takes his leave. The film ends with a medium-length shot of Nixon, the loafers on the balustrade, and the Pacific in the background. The brown eyes express, wonder, doubt, worries.³¹

And the audience? They *sympathise* with Richard Nixon.

³¹ *Frost/Nixon*, dir. Ron Howard, 2009.

Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to examine the way Richard Nixon and the Watergate Affair, in which of course he was deeply involved, have been portrayed in American popular culture, specifically in literature and film. Because there was an overwhelming number of Nixon and/or Watergate inspired works of popular culture, it was not possible to study all of these works. Instead, a carefully selected number of works have been examined in great detail. The underlying assumption for this decision was that if one studied a small, but varied sample of these works it should be possible to trace the various developments in the depiction of Nixon and Watergate, also present in other works. This sample consisted of the following works, in the order in which they have been discussed in this thesis: Philip Roth's *Our Gang: Starring Tricky and his Friends* (1972), Gore Vidal's *Burr* (1974), Alan Pakula's *All the President's Men* (1976), Lars Muller's *The Assassination of Richard Nixon* (2004), Robert Altman's *Secret Honor* (1984), Oliver Stone's *Nixon* (1996) and Ron Howard's *Frost/Nixon* (2008). When these works were adaptations their originals have been examined too, but only when those achieved some degree of fame or recognition, such as Peter Morgan's play *Frost/Nixon* and Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward's book *All the President's Men*. The method used to examine these works was a combination of close-reading and contextualisation. The works have been closely examined both in their own right, and as parts of a larger body of Nixon-related work. If anything, the approach was interdisciplinary: books (fiction and non-fiction), plays, newspapers, documentaries and films have all been taken into account in order to reach a conclusion. The sample consists of many different genres, such as the political satire and the historical novel, so that the sample is as varied as possible in that respect. When necessary, due attention has been given to the limitations, possibilities and characteristics all the media mentioned above intrinsically possess. The play *Frost/Nixon* (2006), for instance differs a great deal from the film of the same title, and the same is true for *All the President's Men*.

The value of these examinations lies in the wide availability and, in some cases, in the popularity of these works. By examining these works one is really examining the different attitudes these works have towards their subject. All works are reactions to Nixon's Presidency, or reactions to cultural and social problems caused by Nixon or arisen during Nixon's presidency. Apart from the contents of the works, the conception and reception of these works are of interest, since these too, are mediators of cultural attitudes towards Nixon. The larger, and ultimate goal related to this pursuit is to make sense of the past, and, more precisely, to figure out why people thought what they thought about Nixon. Obviously, there cannot be one, clear-cut, definitive answer to that question. However, one can still try to put one's finger on the general drift of public opinion considering Nixon, and trace the way in which it changed over time. Nixon, after all, provoked great outpourings of hatred against himself. In that respect public opinion is crystal-clear. But why did this happen? It was not because he was such a terrible person, but because, as figurehead of the U.S.A., he became the symbol of one thing or another for almost anybody. Nixon's humble origins, and his highly malleable persona perhaps made him more susceptible to this. The relationship that Americans have with their President is very interesting: he represents the whole government to many people (who cares about Secretaries of State?) and so if he does anything wrong he receives all of the blame, and not always deservedly so. This, as will be explained further down, was also the case with Richard Nixon, who received, at times, *all* of the blame for everything – period.

As the research progressed and this thesis began to shape up, a number of issues kept recurring. Eventually, it became clear that those issues were the answers to the main research question stated above. Therefore all of these issues will be reviewed briefly. First of all, especially in the earlier works, there was the tendency to demonize Nixon, and to see him as the cause of all evil in the United States. For left-wing anti-Nixon writers such as Philip Roth this was a very convenient way to criticize their president and their country. In the short run, this served them well: *Our Gang* was moderately successful, and so were a host of other works that fall into this category. But hardly any

of these works had qualities which made them transcend their political message. *Our Gang* is highly absurd and at times very funny. But to be able to laugh or gloat at all – which is clearly the book's goal, it being a political satire – one must possess a great deal of knowledge of the Nixon era. In the long run people do not possess that kind of knowledge any more, and therefore the satire no longer works. And while other works by Philip Roth, such as *Portnoy's Complaint* are still taught at universities, for instance as part of courses on Post-modernism, *Our Gang* is not.

The second attitude towards the use of Nixon in works of popular culture is to treat him as the bad apple in an otherwise sound political system. This happens in *All the President's Men* and *Frost/Nixon*, as well as in Andrew Fleming's *Dick*. In both *All the President's Men* and *Frost/Nixon*, the power to force Nixon out of office and to extract from him a full-fledged apology in a series of televised interviews is wholly attributed to a group of clever journalists. Obviously, this is an exaggeration. In reality a variety of factors, among them a hostile press corps, caused Nixon's downfall. Furthermore, Nixon's apology in the *Frost/Nixon* interviews was not as clear-cut as the film makes it out to be. These films also suggest that it will be 'business as usual' once Nixon has left office. These films do not take into account the fact that the presidency had been prone to abuse before Nixon, and that the presidency had gathered more and more power over the years – as described by Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. in the *Imperial Presidency*.

A third attitude, which is exactly the opposite of the one just mentioned, is that Nixon was no worse than any of the other presidents. According to this attitude, one should not put past presidents on a pedestal, not even the Founding Fathers, because they each had their faults. This opinion is chiefly Gore Vidal's, who weaved all of the problems of the Nixon-era into a book about Aaron Burr, another famous villain in American history. Vidal, who was probably ahead of his times, even proposed in his 1984 essay 'Not the Best Man's Man,' that Nixon was quite possibly the best American President of the second half of the 20th century, because he realised the importance of coexistence – as opposed to a nuclear war caused by communism, which, according to Vidal, Nixon believed was just another system of thought, a system no one really wanted.

This leads to the fourth attitude towards portraying Nixon: as a representative of 'the system' and a symbol for something larger. As has been explained already, the President of the United States is to many Americans the only representative of the American government they know. They mostly know him through television. Sometimes, as is the case with Sam Bick in *The Assassination of Richard Nixon*, this causes people to blame their President for things that are really outside his control: Bick blames Nixon for the corrupt society he encounters when things go downhill for him and thereafter decides to kill Nixon. Thus, the film portrays Nixon as the figurehead of a corrupt society that cannot stop lying. In reality, of course, Nixon cannot be blamed for all that; the film merely uses him to get across its cultural criticism.

The Assassination of Richard Nixon, however, is not the only film in which Nixon is portrayed as dishonest. In both *Nixon* and *Secret Honor*, Nixon is at the centre of outlandish conspiracies involving John F. Kennedy, Cuba and Howard Hunt, a club of clandestine businessmen and a lot of shady dealings. This is the fifth attitude towards portraying Nixon. While these conspiracies are not historically accurate, they do illustrate the distrust people felt towards Richard Nixon: he was popular, he was a clever politician, and yet he was not entirely trustworthy. His nickname Tricky Dick is apt, since he had so many tricks up his sleeve, and since he was opportunistic enough to use them at the right moment. But Nixon was also distrustful of other people, and quite insecure. It made people wonder whether Watergate was perhaps unleashed by Nixon's own personal demons. Those personal demons were of interest to Altman and Stone, and, in a lesser degree, to Ron Howard, the director of *Frost/Nixon*. Their portraits of Nixon are all well-rounded and quite sympathetic.

Overall, one can say that over time depictions of Nixon have become more complex and more and more sympathetic. In the earlier works Nixon was mainly seen as America's number one devil, the nation's favourite scapegoat. As previously stated, Frick's book hosts a wealth of Nixon memorabilia. Among them are several grotesque cartoons of Nixon depicted as a kind of hairy ape

with oversized jowls and Pinocchio's nose. Some cartoons even refer to the Third Reich and compare Nixon to Hitler.¹ Printed in Frick's book is a picture of a badge which says 'I was an American P.O.W., Camp Nixon, May '71', with a swastika for the 'x' in Nixon.² The badge illustrates well how excessive the hatred against Nixon became during the late 1960s and the early 1970s. People were truly disgusted by Nixon at times, which resulted in all kinds of highly creative efforts to criticize Nixon, for example Philip Roth's *Our Gang*, but also works titled 'Tyrannus Nix' (a poem by Lawrence Ferlinghetti) and 'D Hexorcism of Noxon D Awful' (a short story by Ishmael Reed).³ Of course, there have been other presidents who were hated, such as George Bush Jr., or Lyndon B. Johnson, but the hatred that poured out against Nixon truly was remarkable.

With the passing of time later works devoted more attention to Nixon as a three-dimensional person and were much fairer in their judgements of Nixon's presidency. Nixon has been considered both the bad apple in an otherwise good bunch (the pantheon of American presidents) and an inevitable disaster waiting to happen, due to the currents of history. The first is a very prevalent view: Eisenhower was a decorated war hero providing stability and prosperity, Kennedy was practically a saint, Johnson built the Great Society, but Nixon caused the Watergate Affair. Of course Nixon was not the first President to abuse presidential power – the abuse had slowly crept into the White House during the Second World War, and had simply never left. The Watergate Affair can therefore be seen as a manifestation of the gradual accumulation of presidential power in the White House.⁴ The Watergate Affair, however, did not prevent Gore Vidal, always keen to have his very own opinion, from proposing that Nixon was in fact the best American president of the second half of the twentieth century. Little by little, Vidal's opinion became more accepted. Perhaps the extremity of the Watergate Affair itself has diminished over time: there have been other cover-ups (PRISM, the illegal use of drones), there have been other conflicts of interests (Dick Cheney and Halliburton), there has been another pre-emptive war (in Iraq) and there has been at least one President who lied to save his own skin (Bill Clinton during the Lewinsky scandal). Spinning the media, which Nixon did in *Frost/Nixon*, has now become a regular activity of most politicians; the straight-talking, honest politician - if such a politician ever existed at all - has become a rarity. If today's standards had been true for Nixon's time, maybe history would not have been so harsh on him.

And if, just for once, one would ignore the Watergate Affair, the record of Nixon's administration might well be called impressive. He passed important environmental legislation, such as the Clean Air and Clean Water Acts, and he established the Environmental Protection Agency. He bettered the plight of the Native Americans, he improved social security and welfare, and he helped initiate the Occupational Safety and Health Act, which established the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA). Due to progressive measures such as these, some revisionist historians have even claimed Nixon as the last truly liberal President, for which he is also credited in liberal circles. Others have praised the way in which Nixon handled international affairs. He had a profound understanding of the complexities of the world's affairs and conflicts. In the realm of foreign policy Nixon initiated the SALT treatments and a détente with the U.S.S.R., and he established relations with the People's Republic of China. As Vidal wrote, Nixon, to everyone's benefit, realised the importance of coexistence and the prevention of a direct war.⁵

Even though depictions of Nixon have become increasingly more positive, Nixon remains a controversial figure, who is still constantly re-examined by scholars, writers and directors. The Watergate Affair and Nixon's ensuing resignation continue to fascinate: the whole Watergate story has so many remarkable twists and turns that it could have come straight out of a political thriller by

¹ Frick, *Reinventing Richard Nixon*, 137,138,153.

² Ibidem, 138.

³ Ibidem, 78,136.

⁴ Schlesinger Jr., *The imperial Presidency*, 376.

⁵ Vidal, 'Richard Nixon: Not the *Best Man's* best man', 68.

Tom Clancy. The American Dream, as always, has cropped up here and there too. After all, Nixon himself, too, lived that dream. He was from Yorba Linda, the back of beyond in Southern California, and became President of the United States. Richard Nixon was a complex man, and he was such a mix of hubris and insecurity that he could easily have been a great tragic hero. No wonder he inspired so many works of popular culture, and no wonder he continues to occupy a curious corner of the American imagination – Tricky Dick, the only president who ever resigned.

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