

Richard Milhous Nixon: The Serenade in B-Flat

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Richard Milhous Nixon, 5' 10", 165 pounds, Caucasian, male, no distinguishing features. Though a man as common as anything on display in a Sears catalogue, he rose steadily to become the most widely reviled man in American history. Have I overegged the pudding? Well then, suggest to me his equal; from all history bring one forward. Even a Will Durant, even a Toynbee, would be hard pressed to find an analogue. Popular journalists resort to the name Nixon to galvanize feelings not even the name Stalin raises. The phobia he stimulates in millions of America's most virtuous and enlightened citizens is impossible to exaggerate, and this seems to be true of people all over the world. From 1970 to 1975, a poll conducted by Mme. Tussaud's Waxwork Museum found him to be among the five most hated and feared men in history. In 1975 only Field Marshal Idi Amin Dada and the late Adolf Hitler surpassed him. Count Dracula tied him, and Jack the Ripper finished a poor fifth.

How is it that the father of Tricia and Julie has earned such disesteem? Is it for his wicked deeds: prosaic lies endlessly repeated, eavesdropping, the bombing of Cambodian progressives, the harassment of North Vietnam's liberal democrats, those brummagem uniforms he ordered for the White House guards? Surely they do not compose the *corpus delicti*. Discreditable acts they are indeed, but there must be more to the Nixon legend than this. Not even Franklin Roosevelt, not even Anita Bryant, is so hotly scorned. Hows come?

When one studies Nixon's public career—his first yelps in Congress; the sobs and growls of his vice-presidential years; the sonorities, the scowls, the whines of presidential greatness—when one studies his opponents—their increasing alarm, their jeremiads, their sniffings, and the eerie regularity with which their reasonable objections metamorphosed into ridiculousities—it grows ever more apparent that this is not a typical political struggle. Rather it is an incomparable succession of bizarreries so traumatizing as to be explicable only in terms numinous and diabolical.

Everything about the man suggests palpable weirdness. Mention his name and millions of Americans leap to their feet yelling. Some, admittedly, have their hands over their hearts. Others have their hands at their throats. They gurgle. They report hearing wild dogs barking and maidens sobbing. Not infrequently they end their lives shouting helplessly from the Freudian couch. Even in American politics such doings are unusual. It is my considered judgment that in the very White House where such giants as Lyndon John-

son and the sainted Kennedy brought their immense dignity, wisdom, and integrity, the Commoner from Whittier suffered diabolical infestation, and no one tried to help. Poor Nixon, everything he touched grew fangs and let out a howl: welfare reform, a generation of peace, an unbalanced budget. In Nixon's hands all such noble aspirations went sinister. "Tory men and liberal policies are what have changed the world," he buoyantly proclaimed, and his guaranteed annual income plan was promptly slaughtered in Congress. Domestic advisors like Daniel Patrick Moynihan were appalled; they had never seen liberals act so strangely. Yet seasoned Nixon observers remained calm. The miraculous destructiveness of the Nixon touch is for them a legend.

Hugh Kenner has said that Nixon should not have been president on aesthetic grounds. It is an observation abounding with truth and stimulative of hitherto unimagined hopes for the presidency. Yet I have always contained my objections to more immediate concerns. Nixon should not have been president for reasons of public health and safety. His presence causes too much distress. In fact I suspect that over the years the untimely deaths of hundreds, perhaps thousands, of America's most upright citizens can be laid to a Nixon press conference, a UPI photograph of the man with his dog, or any of a myriad of other Nixonian apparitions. For instance, Nixon was campaigning strenuously just before the death of Paul Goodman, and during his 1970 European junket we lost Janis Joplin. I take it as a mark of the enormous strength of that great and good man, Alger Hiss, that he survived the entire Nixon reign, though his gaunt mug and watery eyes tell us much about how he has suffered through the "New American Revolution," the "New Federalism," the "China Opening," Julie's "wedding," and all the other dubious public-relations stunts.

The astonishing misfortune that befalls those who come into contact with Nixon is a riveting reminder of the power the occult plays in his life. Whether friend or foe, one steps from his presence and as likely as not the sky falls in. It is uncanny. The closer one's contact with him, the greater one's peril. His friends suffer bankruptcy, the loss of dozens of IQ points, broken spirits, and, with astounding frequency, the calaboose. His enemies suffer similar calamities. I can count three who have been assassinated and several who have been maimed. Dignity, well-being, and soundness of mind so often depart after a close brush with the man that I have no doubt his career is more comprehensible to a

medieval mystic ensconced in a cave than to a modern rationalist with all his books and analytical gear.

Most spectacularly there was the late President Kennedy. Not only was he the first modern president shot from ambush, but he died under circumstances that still excite morbid speculation. His instantaneous apotheosis proved only to be a diabolical prank, making his eventual fall all the more ignominious. It was idolatry contrived from a presidency of singular mediocrity and a life of stunning sham. Nevertheless, soon the facts made their debut: petty political fixing, ineptitude as grandiose as his oratory, a whole family of pinheads and rascals. Floozies began stepping forward from every trailer camp in America, coyly testifying to their personal involvement with what the suave president had cockily called "class." The revelations dragged his reputation from nadir to undreamt of nadir, and soon there was a movement to remove his pictures from the Catholic schools of Iowa. Today the scholars are at work. Nothing can stop them, and within a decade his policies will be the most discredited of any president's since Hoover. His reputation will thud into that dark hole which for more than half a century has been the domicile of Warren Gamaliel Harding alone. Had JFK run against any other Republican doubtless he would be with us today, and his administration would have been enormously more creditable. Did Pat Brown fare much better? Upon beating Nixon for the California governorship in 1962, he rapidly became a laughing-stock, and it is now apparent that fate dealt him an idiot for a son.

What of Nixon's later opponents? With surprising constancy they are sick, dead, convicted of low deeds, under threat of conviction, banished, or absurd. The friends and associates of Richard Nixon have already, and in unusually large numbers, had the prison door clank behind them. Now begin the tribulations of his enemies. The column of petty malefactors and suspects straggles forward. Remember Senator Joseph M. Montoya of the Watergate Spectacular? Remember the Rt. Hon. Carl Albert? Where are they now? Why did they abscond from the limelight so hastily? Think well on the cyclones that struck the gorgeous careers of the Rt. Hon. Wayne Hays and the voluptuous Wilbur Mills. What will become of the blubbing Speaker O'Neill? Will he join the Rt. Hon. Richard T. Hanna, the Rt. Hon. Cornelius Gallagher, the Rt. Hon. Frederick W. Richmond, poor ex-congressman Allan T.

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Miriam & Ivan D. London

The Gang of Fourteen: Street Life in China

A young street tough from a city deep in the Chinese interior—which we must forbear naming—recently came to tea and talk with us. He was still in culture shock, the result of a miraculously sudden East-West transition. On the one hand, stunned by western material abundance, he felt that he had flown “from earth to heaven.” On the other, he had wholly lost his nerve; for the fact was that he had been man-about-town in China, cocksure about assessing any local situation and handling himself appropriately. Now he was as raw and bewildered as a country bumpkin—the very sort of person he had mocked back home. However, he showed no timidity in speaking about himself. We shall call him pseudonymously, in the Chinese manner—“Little Peng.”

Street gangs, both criminal and of the “West Side Story” kind—Little Peng belonged to the latter—seem to thrive out of control in many cities of China, much as they do elsewhere in the world. Chinese recently from Canton and Shanghai often blame the proliferation of such gangs, along with a general increase in urban crime, on the demoralization of Party and school authority since 1966, the beginning of the cultural revolutionary “epoch.” The gangs, they say, also attract floating outcast youth—some of the millions of urban middle-school graduates assigned annually to permanent labor in the countryside, who sneak back into the cities, where they no longer have legal right to residence or employment. The authorities periodically conduct raids to clear the streets of accumulated “rusticated youth,” along with peasant beggars and other illegals—in Shanghai this is called “blowing up the red typhoon”—but the whole company drifts back again in calmer “weather.”

All seemingly true. But—we stir uneasily—are we merely seeing the peculiarly Chinese decor of a universal play? Have we not also in the West wrongly confused social conditions with ultimate causes? But here comes Little Peng straight off stage. We may observe him and listen to his story.

Little Peng lasted one week on the state farm to which he was sent after completing nine years of schooling. “Such rotten housing!” he said. “They told us it was the best they had. No glass in the windows, no ceiling, just a leaky roof. We slept on piles of straw. The food was even worse. And for a drink of water, we had to shoulder a pail and walk a whole kilometer to a well.”

After hightailing it back home, he did not have to worry, like many others, about his rice bowl. His parents, highly paid cadre members, were well able to support him. But his real life, as it always had been, was on the street.

To Little Peng the Red Guard mass movement of 1966 is the dead past. He never followed the great Red Pied Piper in exultation, only to reach the barren fields of despair. He was too small. By the time he became adolescent in the seventies, Mao to him

was a plaster Buddha, from behind which peered a baffling and inept old man. China would have been much better off, Little Peng thinks, “if Mao had died long before Chou En-lai,” who, as it was, could do little more than “mend” the old bungler’s mistakes.

When Little Peng and friends “had great fun” playing tricks on peasant peddlers on the streets and stealing their wares, the peasants would sometimes wail, “How can you good students of Chairman Mao behave this way?!” A common retort was: “Chairman Mao’s good student? Let him get me a good job and then I’ll be his good student!”

Little Peng found no model for emulation at school, or whatever passed for school during most of this strange decade in China, when—to cite a recent confession of the *Peking Review*—the reigning “Gang of Four” “retarded the development of a whole generation of young people.” School was “open the door and have your school outside!” said Little Peng. “Let students have practical work in the field and all that.... The truth was we students *hated* school. Schooling or not, you’re sent to the countryside anyway. One day of school meant one day of fooling around. ‘If you’re a monk, you’ve got to toll the bells.’ If we wanted to go to school, we went. If we were bored, we put our feet up on the desk.”

He made no bones about his “extreme disrespect” for teachers—an attitude conveniently encouraged by the anti-intellectual campaigns of the time. “It got started during the ‘Criticize Lin Piao and Confucius Movement [of 1974],’” he explained. “Confucius had stood for respecting teachers—so we didn’t want that!”

If a teacher got nasty about imposing discipline, Little Peng and his friends would retaliate by stealing his school supplies or (more fancifully): “We’d shape up a piece of s--t, attach the teacher’s name tag to it, and put it in the drawer of his podium.... That was only ‘light revenge.’ ‘Heavy revenge’ was to go to the teacher’s house at night and batter it with rocks, breaking windows and all that.”

Little Peng had equal contempt for the ideologically “positive” student elite, members of the Red Guards—a toothless classroom organization in the seventies—and the higher-ranking Communist Youth League.

“I never was a Red Guard and I wouldn’t want to be one. My good friends all shared this view, because a Red Guard may end up with a good factory job, but socially he’s on poor ground. And we wouldn’t want to be classed with any of them! Those Red Guards and League members are an eyesore to the rest of us...because they’re automatically agents and spies.... They turn in regular reports to the ‘above’ and give us a pain. Suppose a group of us good friends are talking together and this Red Guard shows up and wants to join in. We’d all clam up. And if he still showed no sign of leaving, we’d say, ‘Beat it, before you get poisoned.’”

Little Peng did not even credit the idealism of these ranking activists. “Their faces,” he said, “don’t always match their hearts, for the simple reason that the fear is always there—the fear

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