

Intelligence in Public Media

Being Nixon: A Man Divided

Evan Thomas (Random House, 2015), 640 pps.

One Man Against the World: The Tragedy of Richard Nixon

Timothy Weiner (Henry Holt & Co., 2015), 384 pp.

Reviewed by Thomas Coffey

The spectrum of opinions about Richard M. Nixon is wide, if the two most recent biographies of our 37th president of the United States are any indication. Evan Thomas, *Newsweek* columnist and author of several nonfiction books, has concluded that Nixon was not such a bad guy after all; whereas Timothy Weiner, *New York Times* reporter, discovered Nixon was even worse than imagined. How did these two authors come to such opposite conclusions?

For Thomas, the answer lies partly in his sourcing, which includes reminiscences of Nixon's daughter, Julie Nixon Eisenhower, whose 1986 book on her mother, *Pat Nixon: The Untold Story*, is a poignant look at the president's family. *Being Nixon* is a refreshing and well-written attempt to get past the sinister caricature of Nixon by constantly searching for the good in the man. Thomas quotes a touching letter from Nixon to the teenage son of Thomas Eagleton, who lost his spot on the ticket with presidential candidate George McGovern when it came out that Eagleton had received electroshock therapy—"... your father has] won the admiration of friends and foes because of [his] courage, poise, and . . . guts. . ." (398).

Thomas attempts to be fair by providing context to some of the more controversial episodes in Nixon's life, noting that the Democratic Party leader Adlai Stevenson had a much larger "secret fund" of private donations for campaign expenses than Nixon, who nearly parted with presidential frontrunner Dwight Eisenhower over the controversy. He reminds readers that Nixon was hardly the first postwar president to abuse the powers of the office. The IRS audited Nixon three times during the Kennedy administration, and—being Nixon—he was actually encouraged by this abuse, for it showed in his mind that the Kennedys believed Nixon still mattered.

But Thomas's persistent search for the silver lining behind Nixon and his misdeeds appears strained as Thomas

comes to increasingly rely on Chief of Staff H. R. Halde- man's unadorned and damning diaries, as well as the bunker mentality nastiness that pervades the transcripts of Nixon's White House conversations. *Being Nixon* and its bid to discover what made the president tick fizzles out, ending on the you-can-say-that-again note of, "Nixon was no saint."

Understatement and looking at the bright side rarely burden the writing of Timothy Weiner. After examining two darker US institutions with books about the FBI and CIA, Weiner has proposed that Richard Nixon is the embodiment of darkness. And, much like his take on the two federal agencies, the author finds little of redeeming value in his subject, making the subtitle of the book a false one: Weiner clearly sees nothing "tragic" about Nixon's rise and fall.

The start of *One Man Against the World* reads like a prosecutor's brief: the prose has a hectoring, overwrought tone, with Weiner's noting "Nixon never for a moment saw combat." (11) (Why include the words "for a moment?") Or that Nixon's promotion of two later-Supreme Court justices whose votes were decisive in the 2000 *Bush v. Gore* ruling "bear the trace of Nixon's fingerprints." (28) He interprets everything in the worst way, viewing Nixon's close relations with the military junta in Athens as a reward for illegal Greek financing of his campaigns, rather than as resulting from the importance Nixon attached to US access to a major naval base. (20) Weiner makes critical assertions about Nixon by quoting dubious sources. One source who, as an undersecretary at Housing and Urban Development, was clearly out of Nixon's inner circle, is quoted as concluding Nixon was an "amoral" person. (54–55) But, given this official's outsider status, how exactly would he come to know this about the president?

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Some of Weiner's claims are contradictory. Weiner alleges Nixon was out to destroy his predecessor's Great Society programs; however, he earlier says Nixon had little interest in domestic affairs ("outhouses in Peoria"). (55) One would think Nixon would need to care deeply about domestic affairs if he wanted to end programs strongly supported by an opposition-controlled Congress. Lastly, Weiner exaggerates his case, contending Nixon sold ambassadorships for campaign contributions. (52–53) Besides the "gambling in the casino" naiveté of this charge, he makes a rather thin case for why the reader should care, given the postings were in backwaters—two in Central America and one in Jamaica—hardly plum jobs for a political supporter or, for that matter, a careerist.

Once Weiner gets this opening salvo out of his system, the book settles into a more measured narrative that proposes Watergate and the Vietnam War were inextricably linked. First, he quotes former National Security Advisor Walter Rostow, who contends Nixon's underhanded and successful interaction with South Vietnamese President Thieu right before the 1968 election drove home the lesson of doing whatever it takes to stay in office in 1972. (19) Weiner is understandably critical of Nixon's sending a back-channel message to Thieu that he'd get a better deal with him as president than with his opponent Vice President Humbert Humphrey.

Thomas takes issue with Nixon as well but provides some balance to Weiner's one-sided portrayal, stressing Nixon could hardly be blamed for seeing President Johnson's announced bombing halt, coming just a week before a tight presidential election, as a blatant political stunt, especially since peace talks with Hanoi had gone nowhere for eight months. Thomas also suggests Thieu hardly needed to hear Nixon's reassurances to understand his chances for better peace terms rested with the staunch anti-communist Republican candidate. Johnson found out about Nixon's duplicity but begged off making this discovery public because doing so would divide the country and reveal US spying on its South Vietnamese allies. Thieu's backing away from the talks took much of the air out of the peace initiative and Nixon won the election by a razor thin margin of 0.7 percent.

Nixon's actions against Daniel Ellsberg, who leaked the *Pentagon Papers* classified history of the Vietnam War, was the other link between the war and Watergate. Originally seeing the *Papers* as Johnson and Kennedy's problem since the history ends before he took office,

Nixon fed off National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger's determination to do something to stop foreign policy leaks. Weiner notes that assistant to the president, John Ehrlichman, believed the burglary of Ellsberg's psychiatrist's office to find incriminating information was the seminal Watergate episode, the one that set the stage for all that followed. This crime occurred nine months before the Watergate break-in. (297)

In a more general sense, *One Man Against the World* drives home the point that Nixon's obsession with the Vietnam War fueled the bunker mentality and paranoia that took over White House deliberations. Despite historic breakthroughs in relations with the two most powerful communist nations during visits to them in 1972, Nixon could only underscore, "It is not about China or the Soviet Union. It is about South Vietnam." Weiner points out that Nixon liked to throw out the phrase "bomb them" as he did during the North Vietnamese offensive of 1972—"Those bastards have never been bombed. They are going to be bombed this time." (174) He was not shy about badmouthing administration officials to others, crassly describing his secretary of defense, Melvin Laird, as a "miserable bastard" for being slow in finding bombing targets. (374) Thomas, after noting the somewhat comical, if dangerous, nature of the "enemies list," warns that "Nixon seemed oblivious to the corrosive power of his own rage." (372) And into the breach created by the FBI and IRS's opting-out of the illegal activities in which they engaged for Nixon's two predecessors came the private actors working for the aptly-named CREEP (Committee to Reelect the President). Their bungling at the Watergate complex led to Nixon's downfall.

Nixon held the CIA in some contempt. After the agency failed to catch the 1970 coup in Cambodia, Nixon rhetorically wondered, "What do those clowns do out there at Langley?" (264) Likewise, he complained, "the CIA isn't worth a damn" after its officers failed to prevent Salvador Allende in 1970 from taking office in Chile. (298) It did not help matters that some CIA officers had links to the Georgetown set, which made a habit of belittling Nixon. Thomas points out that Polly Wisner, wife of former CIA chief of covert operations Frank Wisner, often played host for members of this set. Amazingly, Cynthia Helms, the wife of Nixon's director of central intelligence (DCI), Richard Helms, was a frequent guest and apparently joined in the anti-Nixon fun. Nixon was well aware he was an object of ridicule at these get-togethers. (213)

So it is one of those twists of fate that the CIA came to play, some of it coincidentally, an important role in the fortunes of the Nixon administration. The success of Nixon's plan to withdraw US troops from Southeast Asia and turn over most of the fighting to South Vietnamese forces depended on cutting the Ho Chi Minh trail supply line to communist forces. And for this he thought he needed the CIA-run "secret war" in Laos more than ever. Weiner gives a sense of the scale of CIA operations, to include training Laotian irregular forces, assisting Thai forces sent to fight in Laos, and directing combat operations. As CIA historian Thomas Ahern points out in his book about the secret war in Laos, Helms became increasingly concerned the CIA was out of its depth in trying to direct such a massive operation, and he told Nixon that CIA could only interdict so much given the incredible complexity of the trail.^a

CIA links to Watergate had the most impact on Nixon's presidency. The botched Watergate break-in was conducted by a number of ex-CIA officers, including E. Howard Hunt and James McCord, as well as some contractors. Weiner sees the key break in the stalled Watergate investigation's being McCord's testimony against former Attorney General and CREEP Director John Mitchell. Disgusted with the Nixon administration's attempt to have his revered CIA take the fall for the break-in, McCord decided to come clean; however, the most consequential role the CIA played was in refusing

a. Thomas L. Ahern, Jr., *Undercover Armies—CIA and Surrogate Warfare in Laos, 1961–1973* (Central Intelligence Agency, Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2006), available in CIA's FOIA Reading Room at http://www.foia.cia.gov/sites/default/files/document_conversions/48/6_UNDERCOVER_ARMIES.pdf.

to provide cover for Nixon to end the FBI's investigation into the matter. Nixon saw the burglars' affiliation with the CIA as an opportunity to claim the break-in was about national security, with some vague and odd link to the Bay of Pigs. Haldeman told Deputy Director of Central Intelligence Vernon Walters to tell the FBI to cease and desist with the investigation for these very reasons. Upon being informed of this meeting, Helms refused to comply and told Walters there was "nothing about the Bay of Pigs that has not been in the public domain." Weiner is wrong in asserting Nixon wanted CIA to deter the FBI from the whole Watergate investigation. Thomas quotes Helms's account that notes Haldeman told the CIA director to tell his FBI counterpart further investigation into Mexican money transfers could expose CIA assets. In any case, when the White House recording of Nixon suggesting this act of cover-up became public—the "smoking gun" tape—Nixon was finished.

The release of new tape transcripts and other primary documents propel Weiner's narrative, but the story he tells feels old. The new documents seem only to confirm what is known about Nixon's dark side. Paradoxically, Thomas's book, which is based mostly on secondary sources, has an air of originality, perhaps because it looks extensively at a relatively untapped avenue of inquiry, Nixon's good side. In November 1962, after an ill-advised and failed bid for the governorship of California, Nixon petulantly announced to reporters he was leaving public life, so they would "not have Nixon to kick around anymore." More than 50 years and countless books later, we have to ask: how much more of Nixon's life is there left to kick around?



