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The Passed and the President: Presidential Obituaries

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The Passed and the President: Presidential Obituaries

Abstract

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The Passed and the President: Presidential Obituaries

Although tradition dictates that in eulogizing the dead, we turn ordinary qualities into great virtues and minimize the flawed or banal, the presidential obituary is more complex than it may appear. How the death of a president is presented to the public has a far greater impact on later perceptions of that president than does any coverage during his administration. Using the obituary as an entrance point, this study is an investigation not just into presidential legacies, but into how a president is characterized at the moment of death, and whether that characterization can thereafter be redrawn.

Comments

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**THE PASSED AND THE PRESIDENT:
PRESIDENTIAL OBITUARIES**

Chloé Hurley

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for Honors in History*
University of Pennsylvania
and
2008–2009 Penn Humanities Forum
Undergraduate Mellon Research Fellowship

Dedicated to my parents. And, if I am to be completely honest,
To Lyndon Baines Johnson, 36th President of the United States.

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Introduction: How the President Becomes the Past

American patriots used to gather around his porch to hear Ulysses S. Grant cough. The health of the retired general and president was most diligently followed by the citizens of a nation whose continued existence was owed to the very same man. Suffering from throat cancer and unable to speak, Grant was left to communicate by writing on a pad of paper. Newspaper reporters kept their ears tuned to the windowsill of Grant's bedroom, waiting for one more cough to confirm Grant's continuing viability. Although Grant had left the presidency out of favor with the public, *The New York Times* published updates of his health every day throughout his final illness. During the summer of 1885, in the days leading up to his death, no detail was too minute to recount – a small sampling tells a riveting tale:

July 4, 1885: “Longing for real rest: Gen. Grant lies down and had to suffer for it. Restlessness, a coughing spell, and a chill cause his family some anxiety.”¹

July 7, 1885: “Gen. Grant’s quiet day: He writes a little, but retires early because of pain.”²

July 21, 1885: “Gen. Grant quickly wearied: A short ride which exhausted him and alarmed his physician.”³

July 22, 1885: “Death apparently near: Alarm and discouragement for Gen. Grant’s friends. The sufferer excessively weak, unable to take food, dazed at times and twice seeming to be dying.”⁴

July 24, 1885: “A hero finds rest: Gen. Grant’s peaceful, painless death.”⁵

¹ *New York Times*, 4 July 1885.

² *New York Times*, 7 July 1885.

³ *New York Times*, 21 July 1885.

⁴ *New York Times*, 22 July 1885.

⁵ *New York Times*, 24 July 1885.

Another general and former president, Dwight D. Eisenhower, also commanded the nation's attention as his health dwindled. In the spring of 1969, as General Eisenhower faded from complications with surgery and pneumonia, he, too, had a strong presence on the front page of the *Times*. During his long stay at Walter Reed Army Hospital, Army doctors issued daily morning and evening bulletins on the general's health. Reading but a few of the titles makes clear the courage of his last days:

March 4, 1969: "Eisenhower gains; strength returns and he takes food."⁶

March 5, 1969: "Eisenhower, improving, discontinues medication."⁷

March 23, 1969: "Eisenhower rests, but doctors fear sapping of strength."⁸

March 25, 1969: "Eisenhower's condition worse; 'continuous oxygen' required."⁹

March 27, 1969: "Eisenhower's failure to respond called 'unfavorable sign.'"¹⁰

How General Eisenhower dealt stoically with illness seemed, to reporters and to the public, evidence of the kind of man he had been. When he finally passed on March 30, 1969, after a ten-month vigil, Brigadier General Frederic J. Hughes, commandant of Walter Reed Hospital, noted his seven previous heart attacks, and his "heroic battle against overwhelming illness." He was a man who preferred death to life as a "bed-ridden cripple and a burden to his family."

Eisenhower was remembered as "this century's most beloved American."¹¹ One obituary began:

⁶ *New York Times*, 4 March 1969.

⁷ *New York Times*, 5 March 1969.

⁸ *New York Times*, 23 March 1969.

⁹ *New York Times*, 25 March 1969.

¹⁰ *New York Times*, 27 March 1969.

In all corners of the earth where the name Eisenhower was associated with victory in war and a tireless crusade for peace, great men and small were moved by the passing of the man whose rise from a farm boy in Kansas to supreme Allied commander and conqueror of the Axis powers and President of the United States was a story of devotion to duty.¹²

His devotion to duty was one of the two strongest themes that ran through the characterization of his presidency in his obituaries. That legacy, indeed, had been established long before he ever even entered the Oval Office – whatever he did as president could hardly be eclipsed by the fact that he had, essentially, saved the world from obliteration. He had never actively sought the presidency like General Grant, and had undertaken the responsibility of this continued service to his nation at a cost to his own plans.

The other major theme that ran through his obituaries and the memorials eulogizing him was his decency and popularity – his fundamental respectability and likeability. He maintained a stable and high level of approval throughout his tenure and his support was both wide and deep.¹³ He “governed effectively though the sheer force of his popularity among average Americans of both major parties, and it was the average American who was the real source of his power.”¹⁴

At the time of General Eisenhower’s death, America was deeply entrenched in a contentious war halfway around the world. How unquestionably just the American crusade during World War II would have seemed in comparison with Vietnam. In the

¹¹ C.L. Sulzberger, “Foreign Affairs: The Man Who Wouldn’t Be King,” *New York Times*, 30 March 1969.

¹² Felix Belair, Jr., “Eisenhower Dead at 79 as Ailing Heart Fails,” *New York Times*, 29 March 1969.

¹³ George C. Edwards, III with Alec M. Gallup, *Presidential Approval: A Sourcebook*, (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 156.

¹⁴ Sulzberger, “Foreign Affairs: The Man Who Wouldn’t Be King.”

middle of a war of questionable merit and morals, Eisenhower's sterling record must have shone even brighter as a beacon of integrity.

Tradition dictates that in eulogizing the dead, we turn ordinary qualities into great virtues and minimize the flawed or banal. But the obituary of a president is more complex than it may appear. Many things contribute to how we remember a president, among them his actions, his words, his personality, his activities before or after the presidency, and the political climate at the time of his death.

A man dies, but a President need not. He can live eternally in American history, and it is the natural desire of every president to do so.

How does a president become a part of history, and what exactly is the nature of the history of which he wants to become a part? In 1912, Teddy Roosevelt (no rube when it comes to myth-making) gave a speech before the American Historical Association, on "History as Literature." In it, he said "the great speeches of statesmen and the great writings of historians can live only if they possess the deathless quality that inheres in all great literature."¹⁵ To live eternally, the president's narrative must have this "deathless quality" that turns ordinary history into tradition.

But the final verdict on his presidency comes much earlier than his physical death – his legacy is settled in life. A political death often precedes a physical death by years – or decades. Thus, "presidential obituary" is a broad term referring not just to the published obituary at the time of physical death. It refers also to the literal media surrounding a president's political death – farewell addresses, interviews, newspaper articles and television broadcasts – and to the public's lasting impression of the president.

¹⁵ Theodore Roosevelt, "History as Literature," Speech delivered to the American Historical Association in 1912. <http://www.theodore-roosevelt.com/trhal.html>. Accessed 4 April 2009.
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A president seeks to generate a story that is worthy of carrying forward through the ages, as part of a political tradition. There are two ways in which a president shapes this story.

One is through his achievements, the things he accomplishes. The capacity to generate achievements may begin before he has even been elected, and continues until his political death. This “political death/obituary” may come early in a president’s career or may come late, but after this moment, it is nearly impossible for him to define himself through his actions. He may continue to effect change through legislation, he may send troops home or bring them back, he may pass the first balanced budget in a generation, but experience has shown us that later accomplishments such as these may be inadequate to change public perception of his legacy once the political death has occurred.

But deeds, alone, are not enough – are never enough – to secure an eternal life. Steven Skowronek writes in *The Politics Presidents Make*,

Though each [president] has generated a long list of accomplishments, I doubt that anyone would want to use the length of those lists as the yardstick of their relative success. Successful leaders do not necessarily do more than other leaders; successful leaders control the political definition of their actions, the terms in which their places in history are understood. The failures are those who, upon leaving office, look to some time in the distant future when people might begin to appreciate the wisdom of what they did.¹⁶

The second way a president shapes his historical legacy is through his persona: the characteristics that the public associate with him, the way he does things and how he is perceived to *be*. The persona affects how much control the president has over the

¹⁶ Steven Skowronek, *The Politics Presidents Make: Leadership from John Adams to George Bush* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998), 17.

political reception of his actions. It is the persona that highlights certain achievements and obscures others. The persona continues after a president's political death, and endures until his physical death.

After a president's physical death, he becomes the property of American political culture. He has made his bid for immortality, and now it is up to third parties – allies, enemies, historians, average joes – to remember him. Third parties treat the death of the President in accordance with their own political and national needs. What these needs might be differ from president to president, and it is often to our needs rather than to the historical record that we are most faithful.

As *Time* magazine put it when writing about Lyndon Johnson in 1968, “The man in the White House is at once the chief repository of the nation's aspirations and the supreme scapegoat for its frustrations.¹⁷ The president also acts as mental shorthand for the entire United States government. He is its focal point and its symbol. But mentally substituting the President in for the United States government is, of course, an act of make-believe. The president is not solely responsible for all that he is believed to do and to control. Johnson did not single-handedly wage the Vietnam War, just as Ronald Reagan did not tear down the Berlin Wall.

But to remember a president is to forget his context. It is not to understand the man in all his complexity but to connect him to phrases, images, or events that have, over time, come to stand in for him. He is simplified so that he is easier to transmit to future generations.

¹⁷ “The Paradox of Power,” *Time*, 5 January 1968.
<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,712057,00.html>. Accessed 24 April 2009.

If we look at how we remember a president, we can ask why we remember him that way, and figure out what he symbolized or continues to symbolize. We can then understand which events of his lifetime and, and which aspects of contemporary culture have been woven together to create the symbol that endures.

The president is aware of the interpretive culture and endeavors to connect his own personal narrative to a greater national political narrative.¹⁸ If his personal narrative is temporally relevant, his name will go hand in hand with the era; it will be hard to unravel whether he made the age or the age made him. A president who successfully connects his personal narrative to the national narrative makes it seem as though it was prophesied that he should be the leader of his time.

Theodore White writes that “history, once past,” may be interpreted as a logical progression of events leading to an endpoint. “But,” he writes, “history while it happens is fluid and unpredictable, dependent on the institutions of leaders who must break with the learning of the past and discard ideas that time has outworn.” Leaders “must explain their actions to their people and earn their trust while doing so.”¹⁹ In other words, leaders make changes, and the people will be uncomfortable with those actions unless shown that they align with the right narrative. In terms of the president, he will be successful if his actions are perceived as being in harmony with the values of the nation (e.g. “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” democracy, etc.).

It is the president who must understand the tension between his actions and the mood of the nation, between his personal narrative and the national narrative. White writes, “a President can trust no one and no theology except his own sense of history; all

¹⁸ Skowronek, *The Politics Presidents Make*, 24.

¹⁹ Theodore H. White, *The Making of the President 1968* (New York: Atheneum Publishers, 1969), 97.

the instruments of government must be subordinate to this feeling of his for history; and when this supreme guidance is lacking, the instruments themselves are useless.”²⁰

Each of the six presidents I examine has a different story. In my analysis, I have grouped these presidents together in an order that best highlights their similarities and differences. They are summarized in chronological order below:

Although John Kennedy died prematurely, I argue that he never had a political death. If only because of how he died, Kennedy continues to ride a wave of popularity, and his flame burns eternal even as the political landscape of America evolves.

Lyndon Johnson’s political death was his decision not to seek reelection due to the unpopularity of the Vietnam War. It was a war that he neither started nor ended, but whose mantle shrouds him, often obscuring the legacy he might otherwise have had of civil rights and the Great Society. Johnson died in 1973, just four short years after leaving office, while Vietnam and the debate over Vietnam still raged. Had Kennedy not died the way he did, or Johnson not died when he did, we might now have a very different set of political symbols.

Out of all twentieth century presidents, Richard Nixon’s legacy seems the most obvious: Watergate. But when we talk about Nixon’s political death, which one are we talking about? When General Eisenhower nearly dropped him from the Republican ticket in 1952? When he lost the presidency to Kennedy in 1960? When he told the press they wouldn’t have “Nixon to kick around anymore?” after losing the California gubernatorial race in 1962? Or when he became the only man to ever resign the presidency in 1974?

²⁰ Ibid., 13.

Against all intuition, Nixon is not politically dead. Nixon did not have a political death perhaps because he had so many of them. Although he is not brought back like Kennedy as a hero or a symbol, Nixon is still brought back again and again because, as R.W. Apple, Jr. wrote in his obituary, American politics “has never fully recovered,” from his ignoble actions. His is a story that we do not tire of hearing because, like Kennedy’s, it is a myth, a conspiracy, an unsolved mystery. One man stands for light and one man for darkness, but both Kennedy and Nixon possess a strange hold upon the American cultural consciousness.

Gerald Ford has a comparatively short list of accomplishments because he was president for barely two-and-a-half years. What is more, his political death occurred after only one month in office, when he granted Nixon a full, free, and absolute pardon. The press and the public, who had treated the unelected president very favorably until then, recoiled at his decision. Ford lived for thirty-one years, becoming the longest living president ever. Yet time out of office does not automatically neutralize or outweigh deeds done in office. Ford’s thirty-one years as a private citizen did not add or detract very much from his legacy, and he did little to change the record.

Although Jimmy Carter is still going strong at the time of this writing, I have included him in my study because of how he has made use of his post-presidency. Widely regarded as the “best ex-president,” Carter has been almost illogically more successful out of office than in it. Through the Carter Center, the public service center associated with his presidential library, he has been involved in global health campaigns, peace negotiations, and the monitoring of free elections in more than two dozen countries. Although it seemed his political obituary was written when he left office, it

looks as though he is only now doing the things that are to become his legacy, and these actions may retroactively improve his presidential legacy.

When Ronald Reagan died in 2004, it seemed as though many people had forgotten that he was still alive. After ten years of complete absence from public life as he and his family privately lived with the effects of his Alzheimer's disease, suddenly the Gipper was back. A president who was remembered mostly for his personal attributes suddenly became a symbol of all that the Republican party could and should be. His memory was used to great effect during the summer leading up to the 2004 reelection of George W. Bush, his face adorned tee-shirts and bumper stickers – there was even talk of putting his face on the ten-dollar bill! But in the wake of the current financial crisis, some of whose antecedents can be traced to Reagan-era changes, his legacy may yet change. We are still too close to both his presidency and to his death to be able to tell.

Lyndon B. Johnson: Hey, Hey, LBJ, How Many Bills Did You Pass Today?

Embedded in popular memory is the all-too-catchy anti-war slogan used by youth protesters in Washington: “Hey, hey, LBJ, how many kids did you kill today?” Never have a president’s initials been so unfortunate in rhyme.

Johnson was the definition of the wrong man in the wrong place at the wrong time. He was the clunky replacement for a young, adored hero whose promises he now had to deliver. While Kennedy’s death called for canonization or “coronation,” this necessity may have also preempted any accolades that would have gone to the man whose duty it was to succeed him.

Johnson successfully identified civil rights and domestic welfare programs as the relevant issues of the time. But he was unable to give Vietnam a meaning, a historical significance that placed it in the narrative of American history. In 1968, none of the candidates for President understood what was going on in Vietnam. “Almost alone in his understanding of what was happening in the field of combat was LBJ himself,” wrote Theodore White. “His misfortune was that he could not or would not make clear this understanding to Americans as a President should, or explain the mission, purpose and fate of their sons.”²¹

Time magazine chose Johnson as its 1967 “Man of the Year,” and spent the better part of 5,000 words describing him as utterly out of touch with the national conscience. Yet the essay ended on a generous note: “The greatest presidents are those who emerged during periods of severe strain, domestic or foreign. Johnson still has the chance to stand

²¹ White, *The Making of the President 1968* (New York: Atheneum Publishers, 1969), 9.
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among them.”²² Johnson still had the chance, no matter how slim, to turn it around, but he could not take it.

The big, boorish Texan could never compete with the Kennedy glamour. In 1960, he lost the Democratic presidential nomination to Kennedy and settled for the vice presidency, accepting a figurehead position with much less influence than what he could have had in the Senate. But when Kennedy was assassinated on November 22, 1963, all of that changed forever. Johnson was sworn in aboard Air Force One just a little over an hour after Kennedy was pronounced dead.

Just because Johnson had the title did not mean that he could ever conquer Camelot. In the wake the assassination, Johnson was able to unite the American people, but “Jack Kennedy had drained the world’s capacity for unrestrained fascination with the U.S. presidency.”²³ Johnson’s shortcomings would never be given the gloss afforded his predecessor. In a 1970 interview with Walter Cronkite, Johnson would say that his predecessor was “a great public hero, and anything I did that someone didn’t approve of, they would always feel that President Kennedy wouldn’t have done that...that he wouldn’t have made that mistake.”²⁴

Johnson was painfully aware of this from the moment he laid his hand on the Bible. “I took the oath,” he later told historian Doris Kearns, “but for millions of Americans I was still illegitimate, a naked man with no presidential covering, a pretender

²² “The Paradox of Power.”

²³ “The Prudent Progressive,” *Time*, 1 January 1965.

<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,841674,00.html>, Accessed 24 April 2009.

²⁴ Irwin Unger and Debi Unger, *LBJ: A Life* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1999), 517.

to the throne, an illegal usurper.”²⁵ Johnson knew how to craft cooperation from his years in the Senate. He realized that at the outset that to get the public to accept his own political goals, he would frame them as Kennedy’s.

He would present himself as the faithful executor of Kennedy’s will. In his speech before a joint session of Congress on November 27, 1963, he swore that “no memorial oration or eulogy could more eloquently honor President Kennedy’s memory than the earliest possible passage of the civil rights bill for which he fought so long.”²⁶ Privately, however, he was determined to “turn Kennedy’s legacy into Johnson’s accomplishment.”²⁷

In the remainder of Kennedy’s term, Johnson aggressively pursued his own civil rights vision. It was Kennedy who had introduced the new Civil Rights Act, but Johnson ensured its prompt consideration by the Senate. After a 57-day filibuster, the bill passed the Senate, and Johnson signed it into law on July 2, 1964. He had prevailed to pass a civil rights bill stronger than that even proposed by Kennedy.

In the election of 1964, Johnson’s popularity was affirmed in a landslide victory. His 61.1% of the vote – the greatest margin of victory that had yet been tallied in a presidential election – constituted a mandate. He recalled to Doris Kearns that election night was “the first time in all my life I truly felt loved by the American people.”²⁸

²⁵ Doris Kearns, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1976), 170.

²⁶ “Address Before a Joint Session of Congress,” 27 November 1963, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, Lyndon B. Johnson* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1965), 9.

²⁷ Kathleen J. Turner, *Lyndon Johnson’s Dual War: Vietnam and the Press* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1985), 93.

²⁸ Kearns, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream*, 209.

Johnson knew what kind of president he wanted to be, and he wanted credit for it. On March 15, 1965, in his famous civil rights speech, “The American Promise,” he five times proclaimed what kind of President he wanted to be:

I want to be the President who educated young children to the wonders of their world. I want to be the President who helped to feed the hungry and to prepare them to be taxpayers instead of taxeaters. I want to be the President who helped the poor to find their own way and who protected the right of every citizen to vote in every election. I want to be the President who helped to end hatred among his fellow men and who promoted love among the people of all races and all regions and all parties. I want to be the President who helped to end war among the brothers of this earth.²⁹

This is a peculiar way to frame civil rights. Johnson’s goals are ambitious, but it sounds as though he cares less about achieving them than being remembered for them. And he *would* have been remembered for them had not his role as a national healer been overshadowed by his reputation as a warmonger. “Were there no outside world,” wrote Theodore White in 1969, “if America inhabited a satellite planet, capable of controlling its own environment, its own circumstances, its own future, Lyndon Johnson might conceivably have gone down as the greatest of twentieth-century Presidents.”³⁰ This was not to be.

In the absence of an international crisis, Johnson had the luxury to focus on domestic issues. In the spring of 1964, Johnson had introduced America to “The Great Society,” his plan for sweeping domestic reforms and public programming. After the election, Johnson continued full speed ahead, unleashing the stream of legislation that would become the Great Society. He was acutely aware of the role that timing played in the passage of legislation, and how fleeting popularity could be. Between January 4 and

²⁹ “Special Message to the Congress: The American Promise,” 15 March 1965, *Public Papers*, 287.

³⁰ White, *The Making of the President 1968* (New York: Atheneum Publishers, 1969), 12.
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October 23, 1965, the White House submitted 87 bills to Congress, and Johnson signed 84 of them into law.³¹ He signed the landmark National Voting Rights Act of 1965 into law on August 6 of that year.

With the wisdom of hindsight, one could speculate that he pushed through his Great Society legislation in such an avalanche of bills because the situation in Vietnam was becoming too great to ignore. Once he gave in to the fiscal and political demands of that conflict, getting his own country in order would fall by the wayside. “Ideally,” read Johnson’s obituary eight years later, “he would have liked to cut off the world at both oceans to let America put her own house in order...But events were not to allow him to take that course.”³²

Even Johnson’s harshest critics will concede that in substantial measure the Vietnam War was not his to choose but rather only his to lose. His commitment to the war in southeast Asia was consistent with the pledge of three presidents to keep communism from planting its roots in region. If Vietnam were to be abandoned, popular diplomacy held, it would be only the first in a long line of dominoes to fall, thus clearing the way for communism to take over the world. A young, geopolitically protected nation, the United States had a perfect slate of victories up through the middle of the twentieth century. Even as the war outgrew the resources available to it, Johnson was loath to become the First President to Lose a War.

Johnson was reluctant to present the war to the American public as anything other than a peripheral issue. “I knew the day it exploded into a major debate on the war, that day would be the beginning of the end of the Great Society,” Johnson later said. If

³¹ Irwin Unger, *The Best of Intentions: The Triumphs and Failures of the Great Society Under Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 104.

³² Albin Krebs, “Lyndon Johnson, Controversial President,” *New York Times*, 23 January 1973.
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Congress caught a whiff of Vietnam, then minds and money would be averted from Great Society legislation and programs. The importance of a foreign war would supercede the need for domestic improvements. Once American men landed on enemy soil, it would be nearly impossible to deny defense funding.

Speechwriter Dick Goodwin says that as Johnson faced the reality of Vietnam in early 1965, he “reached the height of his leadership and set in motion the process of decline.”³³ Not only would he lose the Great Society, but he also would lose his popularity. A sterling legacy would be lost to a quagmire. “I was determined to be a leader of war *and* a leader of peace,” Johnson said later. “I refused to let my critics push me into choosing one or the other. I wanted both, I believed in both, and I believed America had the resources to provide for both.”³⁴

Through press releases and his speeches, Johnson tried to convince the public that pursuing a war abroad and a Great Society at home were two missions under the auspices of one cohesive agenda. He discussed how America would help Vietnam develop the same rich society that had begun at home, and emphasized the people of North and South Vietnam were similar to Americans, wanting and deserving the same things that Americans wanted and deserved.³⁵ Johnson was passionate about the Great Society, and wanted to highlight his successes in that area while minimizing the situation in Southeast Asia. The frame required too much suspension of disbelief. At the same time, Johnson was lying to Congress and to the public about the escalation of the war. By the spring of 1965, Johnson had already escalated the war. A Pentagon study releases in 1971 would

³³ Richard N. Goodwin, *Remembering America: A Voice from the Sixties* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1988), 349.

³⁴ Kearns, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream*, 283.

³⁵ “Address at Johns Hopkins University: ‘Peace Without Conquest,’” 7 April 1965, *Public Papers*, 394.

reveal that the Johnson Administration had begun planning overt war in Vietnam “a full year before it publicly revealed the depth of its involvement and its fear of defeat.”³⁶ By the end of 1965, there were 175,000 combat troops in Vietnam; by the end of 1966, that number had risen to 375,000. And by the spring of 1968, more than half a million men were deployed in Vietnam.³⁷ These were the numbers of Johnson’s credibility gap.

In 1964, *Time* magazine had named Johnson its “Man of the Year.” It lauded his energy, his legislative mastery, and his ability to bring people together after the assassination of President Kennedy. Three years later, *Time* chose the President again. But this time the honor was dubious. He was “inescapably” the right pick for Man of the Year because he had been able to unify the disparate elements of the nation – in their hatred for him. The public approval polls had “plummeted,” Democrats abandoned him in “droves.” The authors of the *Time* piece seemed almost in awe of his ability to fall so far so fast.³⁸ Johnson seemed stubborn and simple. Around this time, “many who had supported him came to loathe him because of his war policies, and they came to consider him vulgar, tasteless, and insular.”³⁹

On March 16, 1968, Robert Kennedy announced his intent to challenge Johnson for the Democratic nomination. Until Nixon won the presidency in 1968, the Kennedy camp would always consider Johnson to be the major foe. Johnson, after all, had been the nuisance who challenged John for the nomination in 1960, and he was once again in the way when Bobby Kennedy made his move in 1968. Wrote Gore Vidal of Johnson in 1967, “Like Lucifer he challenged the god at the convention, and was struck down only

³⁶ Neil Sheehan, “Vietnam Archive: Pentagon Study Traces 3 Decades of Growing U.S. Involvement,” Neil Sheehan, *New York Times*, 13 June 1971.

³⁷ Max Frankel, “Johnson to Talk to the Nation Tonight,” *New York Times*, 31 March 1968.

³⁸ “The Paradox of Power.”

³⁹ Krebs, “Lyndon Johnson, Controversial President.”

to be raised again as son of morning...With Lucifer now rampant upon the heights, the surviving Kennedys are again at work to regain the lost paradise...”⁴⁰

Gallup polls regarding Johnson, “his general performance and his handling of the Vietnam war” hit a new low of 36% in March 1968.⁴¹ For the first time in 31 months, a majority of his party (51%) expressed disapproval.⁴² Up until this point, Johnson had “held to the posture of a wartime leader too preoccupied to pay too much attention to the primaries and challenges” from the growing list of presidential candidates, but finally, he was forced to reappraise his popularity.⁴³

In a televised address on the evening of March 31, 1968, Johnson unexpectedly ended his political career. As he closed a speech on the de-escalation of air strikes in Vietnam, he dropped one last bombshell of his own: “I shall not seek nor shall I accept the nomination of my party.” Boom.

His political obituary was blasted across the front pages of the nation’s newspapers the next morning: “Johnson Says He Won’t Run – Surprise Decision – President Steps Aside in Unity Bid – Says ‘House’ Is Divided,”⁴⁴ “LBJ Bombshell – Won’t Run – De-escalates,”⁴⁵ “LBJ Bows Out! He Won’t Seek Re-election,”⁴⁶ “LBJ Tells Nation He Won’t Run.”⁴⁷ The *Times* called it one of the “more dramatic developments of modern American political history.”⁴⁸

⁴⁰ Gore Vidal, *Homage to Daniel Shays, Collected Essays 1952-1972*, (New York: Random House, 1972), 237.

⁴¹ Edwards, III with Alec M. Gallup, *Presidential Approval*, 50.

⁴² “Johnson Rating in Poll Hits Low,” *New York Times*, 31 March 1968.

⁴³ Frankel, “Johnson to Talk to the Nation Tonight.”

⁴⁴ Tom Wicker, *New York Times*, 1 April 1968.

⁴⁵ Ted Sell, *Los Angeles Times*, 1 April 1968.

⁴⁶ *Chicago Daily Defender*, 1 April 1968.

⁴⁷ Carroll Kilpatrick, *Washington Post*, 1 April 1968.

⁴⁸ “I Will Not Accept,” *New York Times*, 1 April 1969.

Johnson's reason for withdrawing, he said, was to avoid suspicion about his motives in pursuing peace in Vietnam. As a candidate, his actions could influence and be influenced by the voters. Without an election in the balance, Johnson had more freedom to negotiate with the Vietnamese government. In his own memoirs, Johnson wrote, "I was interested in long-term results, not short-term popularity."⁴⁹ Unspoken but likely understood was that there was no short-term popularity to be had.

Ironically, Johnson experienced an uptick in approval polls after his announcement.⁵⁰ In New York's Washington Square Park, a spontaneous gathering of 200 young people "cheered and cheered" after hearing Johnson's announcement.⁵¹ The *New York Times* observed that the president's announcement and the sense of relief with which some received it "reflects the profound malaise that the people in every part of the country are experiencing as a direct result..." of the President's actions abroad, of a "dreadful, cruel and ugly war – the war that nobody wants."⁵²

Johnson's decision did a world of good, if only symbolically. This might have been the perfect opportunity to reevaluate the situation in Vietnam and to make a clean break with a misguided policy, independent of the egos involved. But sacrifice for the greater good is not the factor that is popularly associated with Johnson's decision not to run. Although everyone from clergy to sergeants to politicians on both sides of the aisle commended his decision, we remember a man driven from office, who did not leave by

⁴⁹ Lyndon Baines Johnson, *The Vantage Point: Perspectives of the Presidency 1963-1969*, (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), 512.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁵¹ "Johnson's Announcement Spurs Increase in Long-Distance Calls," *New York Times*, 1 April 1968.

⁵² "I Will Not Accept."

choice but was “evicted.”⁵³ This might be because his decision not to run did not, in the end, seem to affect the Vietnam peace process.

Having begun his presidency with the highest approval to yet be recorded, Johnson ended his presidency with the approval of only a third of the population. It was this lack of approval that “undermined his ability to govern and eventually drove him from office.”⁵⁴ Although he acted as though it were a choice, it was actually his only option. Or was it? Those close to Johnson swear up and down that he did not leave the race for fear of losing the election – in fact, he believed he would win if he was the Democratic candidate. However, his decision is remembered as an admission of failure.^{55 56}

Johnson left office on January 20, 1969. He flew to his ranch in Johnson City, Texas, on the outskirts of Austin, and proceeded to live out the rest of his life – but not without some agitation. For the first time in 37 years he was no longer involved in politics, although a helicopter from Washington arrived every week to bring him briefings on the continuing situation in Vietnam. He drove around his ranch listening to the radio, and when he felt like it, worked on his memoirs or planned his presidential library.

Even after he has experienced his political death, the President can still make a bid for his version of history. The presidential memoir and the presidential library are

⁵³ William F. Buckley, Jr., *Execution Eve and Other Contemporary Ballads* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1975), 476.

⁵⁴ Edwards, III with Gallup, *Presidential Approval*, 162.

⁵⁵ James R. Jones, “Behind L.B.J.’s Decision Not to Run in ’68,” *New York Times*, 16 April 1988.

⁵⁶ Johnson, *The Vantage Point*, 549.

both important components of the “final campaign.”⁵⁷ A president’s memoir is an opportunity to use his persona to frame (or reframe) his political achievements. He emphasizes his accomplishments, justifies his decisions, and offers alternate explanations in the hopes that *his* interpretation will provide the grist for future historians.

Doris Kearns remembers Johnson telling her that, “Those memoirs are the last chance I’ve got with the history books.”⁵⁸ The native Texan had a suspicion of northeastern academics – those were Kennedy’s men – who, he believed, would control history. But Johnson’s book neither clarified nor rehabilitated his decisions concerning Vietnam, especially since the war was still ongoing. Published in 1971, *The Vantage Point* was written in stiff, formal prose, a style that Johnson felt befit a former president and a tone from which he refused to stray. In his review, David Halberstam wrote that since Johnson was not much of a reader, this must be how he *imagines* books. He panned the memoir for being “antiseptic, ordered, very calm” – the complete opposite of the real Johnson.⁵⁹

Like his autobiography, Johnson hoped that his presidential library would help him set the record straight on the achievements of the Johnson Administration. Both Lyndon and Lady Bird Johnson had been planning the library, which was to be on the campus of the University of Texas at Austin, since the beginning of 1965.⁶⁰ It would have no admission charge and its archives would be accessible to historians and students. His would be the first library of its kind to be associated with an academic institution – something that, to him, spelled prestige.

⁵⁷ Benjamin Hufbauer, *Presidential Temples: How Memorials and Libraries Shape Public Memory* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2005), 178.

⁵⁸ Kearns, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream*, 13.

⁵⁹ David Halberstam, “The Vantage Point.” *New York Times*, 31 October 1971.

⁶⁰ Hufbauer, *Presidential Temples*, 74.

Johnson's actual death was sudden and unexpected. He died from a heart attack on January 23, 1973 at the age of 65. Had he run and been elected in 1968, he would not have lived past his term.

At the time of Johnson's death, two contemporary political developments would have affected how his presidency was interpreted in memorials.

The first was the election of Richard Nixon and rising influence of the "Silent Majority." Nixon's pet constituency was made up of middle-class voters who had been alienated by Johnson's reforms and the social upheaval of the 1960s. As Gary Wills put it, they were "an angry baffled middle class that, paying the bill for progress, found its values mocked by spokesmen for that progress."⁶¹ They were not war protesters and were offended by the nation's highly vocal activist minority. In their experience, Johnson had allowed the domestic situation to become utterly out of control. Johnson's obituary mentioned the recent riots in the ghettos of Los Angeles and Detroit, and lamented that under his presidency "the young seemed embarked on a new permissive pursuit of an irresponsible life style based on drugs, sex and rebellion against authority."⁶² The rise of this silent majority created a different popular culture than the one that had developed under Johnson. Those who now wielded the political and social power were not apt to remember Johnson fondly.

The second political development was actually a lack of development – the Vietnam War was still ongoing. It is probably because of this that Johnson was buried physically in the same spirit he was buried politically. The newspapers may as well have

⁶¹ Gary Wills, *Nixon Agonistes: The Crisis of the Self-Made Man* (Boston: A Mariner Book, Houghton Mifflin Company: 1969, 2002), 499.

⁶² Krebs, "Lyndon Johnson, Controversial President."

reprinted the same copy written when he left office. The language used to describe Vietnam had not changed since 1968; it was still fresh with anger and judgment. In Johnson's *New York Times* obituary, the Vietnam conflict was called "the Vietnam quagmire," "the ruinous war in Vietnam," and the "tragic, ugly, bloody, seemingly endless war in Vietnam."⁶³ That Nixon had escalated the war made no difference. It was as if the American consciousness had to bury Johnson in order to ever achieve closure in southeast Asia.

In his intent to honor a foreign commitment in southeast Asia, wrote Theodore White, Johnson "led a cause of which no American need ever have been ashamed."⁶⁴ Had he communicated about the war so that it seemed consistent with a mission of peace, he might have emerged a great wartime leader. Instead, he planned and executed the war in half-secrecy and lost the chance. While it is possible that the Vietnam War could *never* have credibly been communicated as consistent with the tenor of the times, lying about it certainly didn't help Johnson's cause. Because he kept both Congress and the American public in the dark, the war became a symbol not of fighting injustice, but of hypocrisy. Unable to define the Vietnam War, the war defined him – and in public memory continues to overshadow the very long list of contributions Johnson made to domestic welfare.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ White, *The Making of the President 1968* (New York: Atheneum Publishers, 1969), 97.

Gerald Ford: Opening One Book and Closing Another

On September 8, 1974, President Ford granted a “full, free, and absolute pardon unto Richard Nixon for all offenses against the United States which he, Richard Nixon, has committed or may have committed or taken part in during the period” of his presidency.⁶⁵ In so doing he critically limited his freedom to create an independent Ford Presidency. Upon Ford’s death in 2006, *New York Times* writer Barry Werth wrote, “With a pen stroke a very different Ford presidency emerged.”⁶⁶ By the end of the year, Ford’s approval rating had plummeted 29 points.

Only a month before, on August 9, Gerald Ford had been elevated to the executive office following the unprecedented resignation of Richard Nixon. In his first address to the nation as president, Ford promised, “My fellow Americans, our long national nightmare is over. Our Constitution works; our great Republic is a government of laws and not of men.”⁶⁷

In justifying the pardon, Ford repeatedly used rhetoric having to do with “closing the book” and “ending the story.” Although Ford’s first words as president were a promise that the national nightmare was “over,” by granting Richard Nixon a premature pardon, Ford made sure that the nightmare was never truly finished. President Ford did not pardon Nixon for explicit crimes, but for any crimes he committed or “may have committed.” By preempting a trial, Ford robbed the public of ever knowing the extent of Nixon’s guilt – or innocence. Although he desired to close the book on the issue, he had

⁶⁵ “Proclamation 4311, Granting Pardon to Richard Nixon,” 8 September 1974, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, Gerald R. Ford*, (Washington: United States Government Printing Office: 1975), 103.

⁶⁶ Barry Werth, “Reversal of Fortune.” *New York Times*, 28 December 2006.

⁶⁷ “Remarks on Taking the Oath of Office,” 9 August 1974, *Public Papers*, 2.

instead left it open wide “for a subsequent demagogic rewriting of history that could poison the political atmosphere for generations to come,” according to one op-ed.⁶⁸ He wished to make a break with the past and start fresh, but what he had really done was lash himself to tainted legacy of another man – the exact opposite of what he intended.

Although Ford followed a president from his own party, he needed the public to perceive him as almost the complete opposite of his predecessor if he was going to succeed as an unelected president. The last years of the Nixon administration had been awash with secrets, rumors, and mysteries. Thus, the Ford administration would be open. Immediately after his first address to the nation – “just a little straight talk among friends”⁶⁹ he called it – Ford introduced the nation to his press secretary, Jerry terHorst. “We will have an open, we will have a candid Administration,” Ford said. This first gesture as president was surely meant to convey to the nation that his administration would prioritize transparency and communication. Not only *the* Constitution but also *his* constitution would prevent deceit: “I can’t change my nature after 61 years,” he added.⁷⁰

Although the Nixon presidency had been many things, Watergate, which for the moment seemed to have swallowed the administration whole, was synonymous with lawlessness. Thus, the Ford presidency would be about reinvesting the national legal system with legitimacy, starting in the White House. Three days after being sworn in, Ford addressed a joint session of Congress and quickly dismissed the possibility that his would be an administration of “illegal tappings, eavesdropping, buggings, or break-ins.” On the contrary, there would be “hot pursuit of tough laws to prevent illegal invasion of

⁶⁸ “Pardon for What?” *New York Times*, 10 September 1974.

⁶⁹ “Remarks on Taking the Oath of Office,” 1.

⁷⁰ “Introduction of Press Secretary,” 9 August 1974, *Public Papers*, 3.

privacy in both government and private activities.”⁷¹ And once again, Ford would not just be going through the motions – when asked later in the month if he would establish a code of ethics for the executive branch he answered, “The code of ethics that will be followed will be the example that I set.”⁷²

The press and the public loved this. In his first polls, Ford received 71% of public approval – only one point lower than Kennedy in his first poll.⁷³ Although Ford asked Congress not for a “honeymoon,” but “a good marriage,” the nation at large was eager for a little bit of a vacation. Over 25 months, the unfolding Watergate saga had proved more complicated to follow than a daytime soap opera. Ford, in contrast, “placed no intolerable intellectual or psychological burdens on a weary land.”⁷⁴ *Washington Sun-Times* columnist Mary McGrory wrote later, “the Washington press corps lost its head over Gerald Ford. A thousand reporters turned overnight into flacks for Jerry Ford. They raved about his decency, his smile, his English muffins, his peachy dancing.”⁷⁵ Ford had done little as president but his persona spoke volumes.

Despite Ford’s efforts to make a clean break with his predecessor, the spectre of Watergate still followed him, especially at press conferences. Would there be a pardon? Ford would not publicly commit to a course of action, but frequently reiterated his right as president to pardon, should it be appropriate. But, would there be a pardon? Again, Ford repeated that any decision made before the special investigator had brought formal

⁷¹ “Address to a Joint Session of Congress,” 12 August 1974, *Public Papers*, 12.

⁷² “The President’s News Conference of August 28, 1974,” *Public Papers*, 59.

⁷³ Edwards, III, with Gallup, *Presidential Approval*, 32, 69.

⁷⁴ James M. Naughton and Adam Clymer, “President Gerald R. Ford, Who Led U.S. Out of Watergate Era, Dies at 93,” *New York Times*, 28 December 2006.

⁷⁵ Clark R. Mollenhoff, *The Man Who Pardoned Nixon* (New York: St. Martin’s Press Inc., 1976), 94.

charges would be “unwise and untimely.”⁷⁶ He kept his language ambiguous, his options open.

On September 8, 1974, Ford spoke to the nation on broadcast television. The reasons for a pardon were clear to him.

First, there was the ethical reason. It would be impossible for a former President of the United States to have a fair trial. “The prospects of such a trial,” explained Ford, “will cause prolonged and divisive debate over the propriety of exposing to further punishment and degradation a man who had already paid the unprecedented penalty of relinquishing the highest elective office in the United States.”⁷⁷

Then, there was the moral reason. Ford’s personal values demanded he show amnesty. “I, not as President but as a humble servant of God will receive justice without mercy if I fail to show mercy,” Ford said.⁷⁸ It was his virtuous nature – so appreciated by the American people up until now – that was forcing his hand. He would be the bigger person, and he was telling the viewers that if they could not also rise above, they would be implicated in protracting the nation’s grief. “This is an American tragedy in which we have all played a part,” he said. “It could go on and on and on, or someone must write an end to it. I have concluded that only I can do that, and if I can, I must.”⁷⁹ His conscience told him that only he had the “constitutional power to firmly shut and seal this book.” He would not “prolong the bad dreams that continue to reopen a chapter that is closed.”⁸⁰

⁷⁶ “The President’s News Conference of August 28, 1974,” 56.

⁷⁷ “Proclamation 4311, Granting Pardon to Richard Nixon,” 104.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ “Remarks on Signing a Proclamation Granting Pardon to Richard Nixon,” 8 September 1974, *Public Papers*, 101.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 102.

And lastly, there was the civil reason. Ford believed that the best thing for the national consciousness would be to move forward and leave Watergate in the past. When he addressed the House Judiciary Committee concerning the pardon, Ford said that he had granted it in an effort to “shift our attentions from the pursuit of a fallen President to the pursuit of the urgent needs of a rising nation.”⁸¹ To focus on Watergate was to leech the country of energy that could be used productively.

Although Ford had expressed his reasons for pardon clearly, each reason had a clear counterargument. Even if both sides of the argument had equal merits, Ford was erroneously picking the side that sabotaged the identity that had been so important to his success.

Ford believed it was impossible for Nixon to have a fair trial under the circumstances, and that in the event of an unfair trial “the verdict of history would be even more inconclusive with respect to those charges arising out of the period of [Nixon’s] Presidency.”⁸² However, the lack of trial would lead to just as much, if not more ambiguity. One reporter challenged Ford in a press conference: what if the judicial pardon did *not* write the definitive chapter on Watergate? The reporter inquired into the possibility of launching a special investigation to “write that chapter and not leave it to later history.”⁸³ Ford dismissed this suggestion. He believed that even without a special investigation, “the full story will be made available to the American people.”⁸⁴

Ford had tried to be the voice of morality, to which the *New York Times* had a swift rejoinder. “President Ford speaks of compassion,” ran the next day’s op-ed. “It is

⁸¹ “Statement and Responses to Questions From Members of the House Judiciary Committee Concerning the Pardon of Richard Nixon,” 17 October 1974, *Public Papers*, 339.

⁸² “Remarks on Signing a Proclamation Granting Pardon to Richard Nixon,” 102.

⁸³ “The President’s News Conference of September 16, 1974,” *Public Papers*, 154.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

tragic that he had no compassion and concern for the Constitution and the Government of law that he has sworn to uphold and defend.”⁸⁵ Despite Ford’s moral intentions, emotional considerations could not and should not be considered until the law was firmly in place. Critics cried that clemency should only follow conviction, never precede it, and that mitigating factors should be applied only after a verdict had been reached.⁸⁶ His scruples before God were touching, but he was doing a poor job in demonstrating that the “Republic is a government of laws and not of men.”

In his first press conference following the pardon, Ford was asked to assess public reaction. A Gallup poll taken before the pardon found that 58% of respondents opposed it.⁸⁷ “I must say that the decision has created more antagonism than I anticipated,” he admitted.⁸⁸ Yet his address upon granting the pardon had suggested his awareness of its unpopularity. Ford acknowledged that while he had tried to “consider the opinions of my countrymen,” in the end, it was his decision to make. “I do believe that the buck stops here,” he said, “and that I cannot rely upon public opinion polls to tell me what is right.”⁸⁹

From the moment of the pardon, journalists were writing Ford’s political obituary. One thing was for certain – he would not fare well in the 1976 election. Clark R. Mollenhoff, a former aide in both the Kennedy and the Nixon White House, quickly penned a monograph entitled *The Man Who Pardoned Nixon*, whose dust flap claimed the book “presented facts which every American should be aware of before Election Day

⁸⁵ “The Failure of Mr. Ford,” *New York Times*, 10 September 1974.

⁸⁶ “Nightmare Compounded,” *New York Times*, 11 September 1974.

⁸⁷ “Survey Before Pardon Finds 58% Oppose It,” *New York Times*, 9 September 1974.

⁸⁸ “The President’s News Conference of September 16, 1974,” 151.

⁸⁹ “Proclamation 4311, Granting Pardon to Richard Nixon,” 103.

1976.”⁹⁰ Ford had “dynamited his own credibility, his reputation for sincerity,”⁹¹ and it would not be easy to regain the voters’ trust.

Jimmy Carter, who ran against Ford in 1976, developed a cunning campaign rhetoric that took advantage of Ford’s position. He promised voters, “If I ever lie to you, if I ever make a misleading statement, don’t vote for me. I would not deserve to be your President.”⁹² In a post-Watergate world, perceived sincerity such as Carter’s outweighed things like experience in Washington. Carter would win the presidency with 50.1% of the popular vote to Ford’s 48%.

While waiting for returns on the eve of the election, Ford made an unusual remark: “Perhaps only one who came to the Presidency without being elected can care as deeply as I do to use that power without ever abusing your trust.”⁹³ He was a day late and a dollar short. Altogether, he was a man beyond reproach except for one action – and one that could be justified as motivated by his generosity and the willingness to overlook the bad for the good. Read one obituary, thirty years later: For “...didn’t struggle for the presidency, didn’t win it, but he was determined not to fail at it. His candor and decency helped restore America’s faith in its institutions. It’s regrettable that the pardon...weighs so heavily on his legacy.”⁹⁴

After a fruitless attempt to conceive a “co-presidency” as Ronald Reagan’s potential running mate in 1980, Ford retreated from the political scene. While his

⁹⁰ Mollenhoff, *The Man Who Pardoned Nixon*.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 93.

⁹² Jimmy Carter, *Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President*, (New York: Bantam Books, 1982), 65.

⁹³ “Remarks While Awaiting Presidential Election Results,” 2 November 1976, *Public Papers*, 2841.

⁹⁴ Werth, “Reversal of Fortune.”

opponent in the 1976 election, Jimmy Carter, would eventually go in a nonprofit direction post-presidency, Ford went in a decidedly profitable direction. He became the first ex-president to accept honoraria for speeches, and logged nearly three million travel miles in his first four years out of office. After withdrawing from the 1980 contest, he became free to sit on corporate boards. And sit he did. At his most active period, Ford directed more than a dozen corporations. He is the reason why ex-presidents now become millionaires, and upon his death, he was worth an estimated \$25 million.⁹⁵

While Lyndon Johnson spent his four brief years out of office obsessing about how the nation had misunderstood him, Ford spent the next three decades comparatively uninterested in challenging any given impression of his presidency. Neither his memoir nor his presidential library is particularly challenging (except for the peculiar fact that his library and museum are 130 miles apart). However, he did exercise some control over his legacy in the interval between political and physical death by consenting to a series of interviews with journalist Terry DeFrank between 1991 and 2006. DeFrank, who had been on the Ford beat since his days as vice president, approached the former president in 1991 to ask for a series of “obit interviews.” Ford agreed under the stipulation that they not be published until his death.⁹⁶ The title of the book, *Write It When I’m Gone*, comes from a particularly candid moment from Easter of 1974 in which Ford responded to DeFrank’s statement that he would soon become president, “You’re right. But when the pages of history are written, nobody can say that I contributed to it.” After scaring DeFrank into silence, Ford said, “Write it when I’m dead.”⁹⁷ The book includes Ford’s

⁹⁵ Thomas M. DeFrank, *Write It When I’m Gone: Remarkable Off-the-Record Conversations with Gerald R. Ford*, (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 2007), 68.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 13.

candid remarks on his own presidency and on the men who succeeded him, including “41 and 43.”

For the most part, Ford avoided commenting publicly on politics unless he had something productive to add to the dialogue. In the last decade of his life, Ford contributed to national discussion in a few small yet significant ways. Two examples in particular suggest that in fact Ford *had* been reviewing his political legacy in his years since leaving office.

During President Clinton’s impeachment hearings in 1998, Ford proposed a creative censure resolution that hinted at years of reflection on his own experience with law-breaking presidents. Ford – who did not think President Clinton had committed an impeachable offense – attempted to negotiate a deal with the President whereby Ford would defend Clinton against impeachment if Clinton would admit to perjury.

Ford wrote an editorial for *The New York Times* suggesting that this year, Clinton forego a state of the union address and instead faces the joint session (and the nation) not “at the rostrum,” but “in the well of the House.” At that time, Clinton would be called upon to take full responsibility for how he had hurt the nation. “I emphasize,” wrote Ford, “this would be a rebuke, not a rebuttal by the President.”⁹⁸ In the editorial, Ford shared the lesson that he learned from his own presidency and his pardon of Nixon – to heal the country and to move the nation forward, the President cannot be involved in an endless, dragging legal trial. But to heal the country and move the nation forward, the President *must still stand trial*, if only symbolically. Even if he is not to be punished, the President must admit to his crimes. If Clinton were to humble himself before the public in this way, it would be the “first moment of majesty in an otherwise squalid year,” wrote

⁹⁸ Gerald Ford, “The Path Back to Dignity.” *New York Times*, 4 October 1998.
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Ford.⁹⁹ Despite the promising possibilities of this proposal, Clinton told Ford on the phone that he could not and would not admit to lying under oath. The conversation ended there. Ford later told DeFrank that one his regrets had been that he never interrogated Nixon point-blank.¹⁰⁰ He would not allow his chance to hear the truth slip by again.

The next year, in 1999, as cases concerning the University of Michigan's affirmative action policy wended their way through the legal system all the way to the Supreme Court, Ford wrote an editorial for *The New York Times* in defense of the policies used at his alma mater to approach racial balance.¹⁰¹

The requirement that his interviews remain classified until his death also casts a different light on his character. In addition, Ford's responses to the impeachment of President Clinton and the contentious affirmative action policies at Michigan are enigmatic footnotes to a political story that had ended more than two decades earlier.

Ford died on December 26, 2006 at the age of 93, having lived longer than any former president. Who knows what a Ford presidency could have accomplished were it not for his pardon, a most grave and irreversible misstep? Tom Wicker wrote in his column that the advance pardon had "obliterated the opportunity [Ford] had appeared to be nourishing to go to the voters as a man of unchallenged probity and personal restraint, who in a time of crisis had restored honesty to government and limits to executive power."¹⁰²

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ DeFrank, *Write It When I'm Gone*, 130.

¹⁰¹ Ford, "Inclusive America, Under Attack," *The New York Times*, 8 August 1999.

¹⁰² Wicker, "A New Kind of Cover-Up," *New York Times*, 10 September 1974.

The New York Times called the pardon a “profoundly unwise, divisive and unjust act” which had “made possible the clouding of the historical record and undermined the humane values he sought to invoke.” Ford had grossly misinterpreted the will of the public. There would be differing opinions as to what an appropriate end to the Watergate scandal should be. By pardoning Richard Nixon less than one month after assuming the presidency, Gerald Ford chose one ending, and many Americans disagreed with his choice. With this action, Ford would begin his own ending. He may have taken from the people the choice on how to end Watergate, but they in turn chose the ending to the Ford presidency – begun so recently and with such promise. For Ford would lose popularity after granting the pardon, and he would forever be synonymous with that action.

Jimmy Carter: Above and Beyond the Presidency

Perhaps no one has worked harder to edit his own obituary than Jimmy Carter. Although Jimmy Carter is still alive, he is included in this study because of all he has done since leaving the White House to change his legacy. Facing the deadline of the final obituary, since leaving office in 1981, Carter has moved speedily to change the residual impression of the Carter presidency. The *New York Times* remarked in 1993 that the Carter presidency “seems like a work still in progress, with his stock having risen substantially in the years since he left office.”¹⁰³ I am in no way suggesting that Carter’s recent pursuits have been motivated by a desire to redefine his presidency, only pointing out the exceptional effect of his post-presidential activities on his legacy.

The presidents already discussed lost the authority to define themselves through action before they left office. Carter barely had the authority to define himself while in office at *all*. The energy crisis, stagflation, and the Iranian hostage crisis were just a few things that took Carter for a ride before he could grab hold of the steering wheel. It seems unlikely that Carter could redefine himself outside the White House – where he would have considerably less power and visibility. However, as presidents have been elected at younger and younger ages, a lengthy post-presidency has become a “new phase of presidential privilege.”¹⁰⁴ Carter has even found greater freedom to accomplish some of the things he was unable to as president.

¹⁰³ “Carter Center: More Than the Past,” *New York Times*, 30 May 1993.

¹⁰⁴ Mark K. Updegrave, *Second Acts: Presidential Lives and Legacies After the White House* (Guilford, CT: The Lyons Press, 2006), xvi.

It is by now taken for granted that Jimmy Carter is the “best ex-president in American history.”¹⁰⁵ His is the example to follow. Bill Clinton wrote in his own autobiography that “Jimmy Carter had made a real difference in his post-presidential years, and I thought I could too.”¹⁰⁶

In an essay for *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Irena Balenky classifies ex-presidents in six categories: the still ambitious, exhausted volcanoes, political dabblers, first citizens, embracers of a cause, and seekers of vindication. Jimmy Carter is definitely an “embracer of a cause.” Since Carter left Washington in 1981, he has been deeply involved in charitable causes all over the world. To give just a few examples, through the Carter Center, the public service organization associated with his presidential library he has been involved in public health initiatives in Ghana, Sudan, Nigeria, and Ethiopia; in election-monitoring in Panama, Nicaragua, Guyana, Liberia, and Indonesia; and diplomatic negotiations with Haiti, Cuba, Bosnia-Herzegovina and the Middle East.¹⁰⁷ In 2002, he received the Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts “to find peaceful solutions to international conflicts, to advance democracy and human rights, and to promote economic and social development” through the Carter Center.¹⁰⁸ When, one day, we make a final evaluation of Carter, these things will probably weigh heavily on our assessment of his effectiveness and his accomplishments.

¹⁰⁵ Irena Balenky, “The Making of the Ex-President, 1797-1993: Six Recurrent Models,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 29 (March 1999), 160.

¹⁰⁶ Bill Clinton, *My Life*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004), 876.

¹⁰⁷ Jimmy Carter, *Beyond the White House: Waging Peace, Fighting Disease, Building Hope* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2007)

¹⁰⁸ Norwegian Nobel Committee, 2002 Nobel Prize Announcement,” http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/2002/press.html. Accessed 15 April 2009.

The Presidency was not Carter's shining moment. Indeed, his political death may have been his presidency in total. It baffled many why "such a disciplined and intelligent man, taking office with so much good will and representing a majority party that controlled both houses of Congress, achieved what the American people obviously judged to be so little."¹⁰⁹ Carter possessed virtue and intelligence in spades, but he lacked two important skills: the ability to "do politics," and the ability to communicate his goals in a way that involved the big picture.

Carter may have had a clear agenda, but he seems never to have learned how to operate in Washington. He won office partially because of his status as an "outsider," but his inexperience in Washington hurt him once he found himself on the inside – and alone. He did not reach out to experienced Washington politicians, and wasted valuable time, as former speechwriter James Fallow put it, "rediscovering fire, the lever, the wheel."¹¹⁰ Once he developed an idea, he often had a difficult time implementing it. Tom Wicker lamented that "instead of building momentum toward his major goals, he attacked them head-on and headlong. That may have been bold but it was not *political*, a word that in its best sense describes more than the art of winning elections and defines what a President must be, above all."¹¹¹

But even more fundamental than any specific policy blunder, the president "had a more general failing: an inability to persuade the American people."¹¹² Carter had a communication problem. A Herbert Block cartoon from May 1978 shows a fuzzily drawn Carter standing with a man from "communications repair." Carter gestures helplessly at

¹⁰⁹ Wicker, "A Failure of Politics," *New York Times*, 16 January 1981.

¹¹⁰ James Fallows, "The Passionless Presidency," *The Atlantic Monthly* 243 (May 1979): 44.

¹¹¹ Wicker, "A Failure of Politics."

¹¹² *Ibid.*

his own fuzzy image on the nearby television screen. “It comes out fuzzy,” reads the caption.¹¹³ Despite a magnetic personality, Carter often could not mobilize people around issues. He offered people “no idea to follow,” and lacked “the ability to explain his goals, and thereby to offer an object for loyalty larger than himself.”¹¹⁴ When Carter did try to drum up support for an issue, he focused too much on the specifics, not enough on the big picture. After Watergate, voters may have desired “straight talk,” but Carter played it too straight. Fallow described how Carter’s instructions for speeches centered on a list of topics, rarely a general theme or tone. Without engaging rhetoric, issues like the energy crisis fell flat.

In a two-part essay written for *The Atlantic* in 1979, James Fallow described Jimmy Carter’s as a “passionless presidency.” He wrote that Carter had “trouble generating excitement, not only in the nation but even among the members of his own staff.”¹¹⁵ Although Fallow was cynical about the almost cult-like devotion of “Kennedy men” to their leader, it did make him wonder. Fifteen years later, Kennedy’s staffers still gathered around the fire to talk about the glory days – he doubted that the same would be true of “Carter men.” Even Nixon at his least popular had more allies in his inner circle than did Carter at his peak.¹¹⁶

These problems affected Carter’s chances in the 1980 presidential election. Kathleen Hall Jamieson writes that “voters approached the general election confident that

¹¹³ Herbert Block, *Herblock: A Cartoonist’s Life* (New York: Maxwell Macmillan International, 1993), 268.

¹¹⁴ Fallows, “The Passionless Presidency,” 34.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 42.

¹¹⁶ Fallows, “The Passionless Presidency II,” *The Atlantic Monthly* 243 (June 1979), 75.

they knew that Jimmy Carter was a well-intentioned, fundamentally decent person but an incompetent president.”¹¹⁷

At the moment of a famous person’s death, a newspaper must have an up-to-the-minute obituary. To that end, newspapers keep frequently updated obituaries on file for important subjects. What would have been the final assessment of Carter’s presidency had he died shortly after leaving office? One way to approach this question is to look at a final appraisal of his presidency written at the time of his departure from office. The last season of an administration, as a president-elect waits in the wings, is a prime time for presidency postmortems.

The *New York Times* wondered “was this a weak President or only a time of a weak presidency?”¹¹⁸ Was the failure of the Carter presidency the President’s fault? Or was it the political environment? Carter seemed to think it was the environment. In his farewell address, Carter described his as the office “most severely constrained by law and custom.”¹¹⁹ Carter seemed to suggest that it was the presidency that had gotten in the way of his presidency.

The *Times* criticized him for seeming to deflect all blame when giving his farewell speech:

The speech presented an opportunity to reflect on the modern Presidency, to tell the public what he has learned in the Oval Office. But there was not much of that. For the most part, Mr. Carter was judging Ronald Reagan rather than himself – just as, throughout his term of office, he was quicker to respond to external events than to assert his own goals and priorities. Even when, briefly, he described the

¹¹⁷ Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Packaging the Presidency* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 428.

¹¹⁸ “The President’s Report Card,” *New York Times*, 16 January 1981.

¹¹⁹ “Farewell Address to the Nation,” 14 January 1981, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, Jimmy Carter, 1980-81*, Book III (Washington: United States Government Printing Office: 1982), 2890.

need for a strong President, he seemed to be insisting that all the factors that caused Jimmy Carter to be a weak one were external.¹²⁰

Had he returned to Plains, Georgia and secluded himself on the farm, as did Lyndon Johnson, or had he pursued business, like Gerald Ford, this might have been the final word on Jimmy Carter. For a while, Carter did recede – he fiddled around in his woodshop, tried to organize his financial affairs, and pecked away at his memoirs. But he was depressed. Then one night Carter woke in the middle of the night with a plan for his post-presidential life.

He wished to establish an organization connected with his presidential library that would carry on the kind of conflict moderation at which he had proved so adept during the Camp David Accords. The result was the Carter Center, a think tank that is unique in that it is primarily an action agency.¹²¹

Carter took a very different approach both to his presidential library and to his memoirs. At this date, Carter has written more than twenty books, a list of which includes two books on the Middle East, a book about aging, a collection of poetry, several different reflections on his presidency, and two picture books.

The seeds were present in his farewell address. He had said that he was leaving office, “to take up once more the only title in our democracy superior to that of President, the title of citizen.”¹²² “I intend to work as a citizen,” he said, “as I’ve worked here as President, for the values this Nation was founded to secure.”¹²³ At the time, it may have sounded like a case of “sour grapes.” However, his later accomplishments suggest that

¹²⁰ “The President’s Report Card.”

¹²¹ Carter, *Beyond the White House: Waging Peace, Fighting Disease, Building Hope* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2007), 8.

¹²² “Farewell Address to the Nation,” 14 January 1981, *Public Papers*, 2889.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 2893.

for the changes he wished to make, it was more useful to have *been* a president than to *be* a president.

In his memoir, Carter wrote that his experience during the 1980 election had caused him to appreciate why President Johnson had withdrawn from the race in 1968. The compromises required of a political candidate were at odds with the ideals of a peacemaker, and vice versa. Carter's own position as a candidate in 1980 had certainly affected his flexibility in handling the Iranian hostage crisis. Learning from this lesson, Carter hoped to continue "using my influence, perhaps with greater freedom now, to promote the same ideals I had espoused during my Presidency."¹²⁴ Perhaps he could be more successful out of office than in it. Like Johnson, Carter had felt an uncomfortable tension between diplomatic negotiation and electioneering. Unlike Johnson, Carter would remain involved in international relations even after leaving office.

At a time when few former presidents were using their influence in a socially productive way, Carter saw a unique opening for his own post-presidency. Brinkley writes, "Ronald Reagan had sold the cachet of his U.S. presidency to the Japanese for \$2 million in speaking fees, Gerald Ford spent much of his time in Palm Springs working on his golf swing while collecting director's fees from corporate boards, and Richard Nixon was holed up in New Jersey with his Dictaphone in an endless quest to remake his image from dirty crook to international sage. Moral considerations did not seem to weigh heavily upon these men."¹²⁵

The library differs from the other presidential libraries because it is, "part of a complex whose goals are making policy and effecting change as well as recording

¹²⁴ Carter, *Keeping Faith*, 575.

¹²⁵ Douglas Brinkley, *The Unfinished Presidency: Jimmy Carter's Journey Beyond the White House*, xvi.

history.”¹²⁶ “We wanted it to be a teaching center rather than a monument to me,” Carter said of the Center, which was dedicated in 1986.¹²⁷

One of the Center’s seven founding principles is to not be deterred from a worthy cause by the prospect of failure. Carter has written that while the president is concerned mostly with countries that economically influence the rest of the world, his work with the Carter Center has allowed him to concentrate on countries that are otherwise neglected. Although the Center has occasionally lent its support to larger global health causes such as HIV/AIDS, it specializes in “neglected diseases,” such as Guinea worm disease and river blindness.

Jimmy Carter’s many charitable causes throughout the world portray him as a man whose capacity for doing good is *limited* by politics. The persona he has developed since leaving office nearly thirty years ago makes him seem as though his dreams are above the presidency. Those who have come and gone from the White House after Carter have followed his example: both George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton have developed charitable foundations. Although he fully understands how his political career has enabled him to operate as freely as he now does, Carter’s presidency may become almost irrelevant in how the world best remembers him.

¹²⁶ “Carter Center: More Than the Past” *New York Times*, 30 May 1993.

¹²⁷ “Reshaped Carter Image Tied to Library Opening” *New York Times*, 21 September 1986.

John F. Kennedy: Don't Think, Feel (Pt. 1)

After the death of John F. Kennedy, reporters scrambled to present a seamless narrative of the president's life and legacy. At the same time, they were competing for the role of cultural arbiter, to win the opportunity to create collective memory. However, it was Jacqueline Kennedy, quoting a Broadway musical to journalist Theodore White, who in 21 words created the sound-bite that would dominate all other attempts to summarize the late president: "Don't let it be forgot, that once there was a spot, for one brief shining moment that was known as Camelot."¹²⁸

White wrote of his interview with Mrs. Kennedy, "She wanted me to rescue Jack from all these 'bitter people' who were going to write about him in history. She did not want Jack left to the historians."¹²⁹

But Jack bypassed history and went straight to myth. Because he was assassinated at in bloom of his presidency, he is eternally President in our eyes.

For Kennedy, there are no biographies, only hagiographies. The tone is religious, not political. Because of the manner of his death and the emotion that has subsequently clouded several generations' perception of it, historians are challenged when attempting to tackle his legacy with standard academic discipline. Strictly historical accounts tend to be dull, while the dynamic ones tend to blur fact with emotion. Three of the best writers to have engaged in the Kennedy presidency (William Manchester, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., and Theodore H. White) all admit that they are deeply involved with their subject, are

¹²⁸ White, *Theodore White At Large: The Best of His Magazine Writing, 1939-1986*, Edward Thompson, ed. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1992), 21.

¹²⁹ White, *In Search of History: A Personal Adventure*, (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1978), 520.

unable to proceed without including a part of themselves. Discussion of Kennedy's stature as a historical figure is always colored by his magnitude as a cultural icon. The narrative of Kennedy's death and the narrative of the nation are clearly fused. The social upheaval of the sixties might have been either cause or symptom (or neither) of Kennedy's assassination. But for many alive to experience it, his death retroactively divided the sixties into a time of innocence and a time of disappointment. Barbie Zelizer writes that the "great expectations" that people claim they had at the outset of the sixties were only discovered after his death.¹³⁰

Kennedy's death also has a personal relevance to people, as it intersects with the story of almost every single American was alive on that November day. As "I remember where I was when I heard about Pearl Harbor" is the shared narrative moment of the generation that came of age in the first half of the twentieth century, "I remember where I was when I heard President Kennedy was shot," is the shared moment of the next generation.

Kennedy's assassination altered our evaluation of his impact while in office. Had he lived, would he have been remembered as one of America's best presidents? "Kennedy dead has infinitely more force than Kennedy living," wrote Gore Vidal in a 1967 essay for *Esquire*. "Though his administration was not a success, he himself has become an exemplar of political excellence."¹³¹ Vidal drily suggested that the Kennedy family threw its resources behind the Camelot myth to fuel the campaign of its next heir, Bobby Kennedy. If the public were to associate the first Kennedy presidency with better

¹³⁰ Ibid., 101..

¹³¹ Gore Vidal, *Homage to Daniel Shays, Collected Essays 1952-1972* (New York: Random House, 1972), 235.

times, they would look to Bobby for a reprise. Through the mystique of Camelot, Gore Vidal quips, “the past must be transformed, dull facts transcended.”¹³²

In evaluations of Kennedy, form always transcends the facts. America had been in love with the Kennedy aesthetic for years, but his administration had barely gotten its sea legs when he was killed. Thus, Kennedy is judged more by his words than his deeds. His contribution to the canon of presidential oratory was great: Ask not what your country can do for you. Let us never negotiate out of fear, but let us never fear to negotiate. Let them come to Berlin. Theodore White later wrote, “Style, to Kennedy, was very relevant to politics. Indeed style was the essence of personality; personality determined the quality of leadership; leadership was what the country needed and what he offered in the campaign of 1960.”¹³³ The persona was all.

Remembering Kennedy is more about a certain *feeling* than about what he actually did while in office, and the feeling is that he got the nation “moving.” “For all I know or care,” wrote journalist Tom Wicker, “John Kennedy may have played such tricks before high heaven as make the angels weep, but for a while he lifted his people and, as he had promised, got his country moving again.”¹³⁴ Although the United States had been experiencing unprecedented levels of prosperity at the time of the 1960 election, Kennedy had warned that the nation was slipping behind and would soon be left in the dust. In recalling the age of Kennedy, then, we remember some sort of undefined evil on the periphery of our lives, an evil that Kennedy kept at bay. “His dreams and his oratory

¹³² Ibid., 236.

¹³³ White, *In Search of History*, 462.

¹³⁴ Tom Wicker, “Introduction,” in *Four Days in November: The Original Coverage of the John F. Kennedy Assassination by the Staff of The New York Times*, (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2003), 20.

had electrified a country grown stale and listless and a world drifting helplessly toward Armageddon,” wrote Manchester.¹³⁵

This hero-worship certainly rankled his critics. In 1963’s *J.F.K. The Man and the Myth*, conservative columnist Victor Lasky attempted to keep Kennedy’s rhetoric separate from the reality. “No one can dispute the fact that he appeared to be in perpetual motion,” he wrote, “But motion does not necessarily mean progress. It was, in fact, motion largely without movement.”¹³⁶

The United States government, itself, had an interest in perpetuating the Kennedy myth. It packaged the 35th President in a manner absolutely antithetical to history – as propaganda. In 1966, the United States Information Agency (USIA) produced the film *Years of Lightning, Day of Drums*, a narrative of the Kennedy presidency and its accomplishments. Not intended for general public viewing, it was instead produced to cultivate pro-American sentiment abroad. Where Kennedy was popular abroad, his image or person aroused even more frenzy than it did in the States. The film presents Kennedy not just as an international king, but an international messiah.

The entire film pivots off the “day of drums,” the day of the state funeral for Kennedy on November 25, 1963. As the funeral cortège proceeded down Pennsylvania Avenue from the White House to the Capitol, the only sounds that split the silence of the city were the clacking of horse hooves and the muffled cadence of drummers. Any part of the film that deals with the president’s death is accompanied by this continuous,

¹³⁵ William Manchester, *The Death of a President: November 20-November 25, 1963*, (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1967), 624.

¹³⁶ Victor Lasky, *J.F.K. The Man and the Myth*, (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1963), 501.

hypnotizing drumming. The film, itself, is intellectually numbing; the viewer is meant to forego analysis for emotion.

This tone is established in the very first moments of the film, as we hear Gregory Peck's ominous narration:

It was true that the assassin took careful aim. It was true that at the precise moment the assassin waited for the president was killed. But it was also true that the assassin missed his target. For he wanted John Kennedy to die. And that he was unable to do. For no man can take away years of lightning with a single day of drums.¹³⁷

The film trades in linguistic riddles such as these, casually blending rhetoric and real life.

Kennedy's memory was to inhabit a semantic space, not an almanac of facts.

When the film's narration arrives in Dallas, the anthropomorphizing begins:

It was over, in one blurred motion of history, the crime was done. History will pick up its cold pen and book and write in chronological order the events of the day with the date and the time and the city. But history will be wrong, for there wasn't one date, one time, or one city.

Historical methods, it seems, are inadequate for recording such tragedy. For the purposes of propaganda, Kennedy has been transformed into an ahistorical figure; he transcends time.

His death tore the fabric of the world. At the hour of his funeral "for a section of time in the life of earth there was one common thought on the minds of three billion people," Peck intones as the camera shows Buddhist monks in prayer, Japanese schoolchildren with heads bowed, Arab men kneeling on the steps of a mosque.

Each person of the earth was drawn to a thought even more personal than their memory of the president. . .there was the thought of each person's own mortality, their own straight lines that would start at birth and would end with death. . .The

¹³⁷ *Years of Lightning, Day of Drums*, Dir. Bruce Herschensohn, United States Information Agency, 1966.

president who had so much under control was not master of the length of that line. Perhaps his message to the world was just that.¹³⁸

If this account were to be believed, the revelation of Kennedy's mortality caused each person to reevaluate his own connection to the earth.

The film lays the mortal Kennedy to rest and sets free the transcendent Kennedy.

The film concludes:

The day of drums is over, but the years of lightning glow in everyone he touched and everyone he continues to touch. John F. Kennedy is now silent and invisible. But so is peace and so is love and so is faith and so are memories and dreams.

Kennedy has been released from his mortal coil and is now free to be as boundless as these other eternal qualities.

The reverence felt for Kennedy demands comparison with that felt for our other slain god-president, Abraham Lincoln. Within days of Lincoln's death, wrote Lloyd Lewis, "Myth had taken the man, irresistible forces had him, and very soon no one was safe in proclaiming that Abraham Lincoln had once been a very human creature."¹³⁹

A collection of memorial addresses for Lincoln opens by setting the scene of April 15, 1865:

The sun set on happiness and rejoicing; the mantle of night fell on the land, and ere it lifted a deed was consummated the intelligence of which should shake the world.¹⁴⁰

Compare this with the unfolding of November 22, 1963, in *Years of Lightning, Day of*

Drums:

¹³⁸ *Years of Lightning, Day of Drums*.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 352.

¹⁴⁰ *Our Martyr President Abraham Lincoln: Lincoln Memorial Addresses* (New York: The Abingdon Press, 1915), 7.

November the 22nd began without a hint that it would be remembered. The country awoke without knowing the president was to sleep. The people rose, not knowing the sun would set at midday.¹⁴¹

In 1929's *Myths After Lincoln*, Lewis would attempt to explain an advanced society like America's pagan-like worship of its slain president. He drew a parallel to the tribal practice of sacrificing a leader to the gods in times of famine or other strife. Although most tribes evolved to abandon the ritual of human sacrifice, the death of a leader was still seen as mysterious, somehow miraculous. The death was taken to signal a change in fortune.¹⁴² Was not Lincoln slain at the moment of greatest consequence for the nation since its founding? The death, sacrifice and rebirth of the nation were symbolized in the person of Abraham Lincoln.¹⁴³

William Manchester cribbed Lewis' depiction of president-as-sacrifice in 1967's *The Death of the President*. He went on to describe how the hero's real attributes are buried by the other meanings heaped upon him: "What the folk hero was and what he believed are submerged by the demands of those who follow him. . . All the people ask of a national hero is that he have been truly heroic, a great man who was greatly loved and cruelly lost. Glorification and embellishment follow. In love nations are no less imaginative than individuals."¹⁴⁴ All the people ask is that he have been truly heroic – the people are thus disposed to think of their leader, in this case Kennedy, as having died for something of vital importance, a crucial crossroads in the nation's history.

¹⁴¹ *Years of Lightning, Day of Drums*.

¹⁴² Lloyd Lewis, *Myths After Lincoln*, (New York: The Press of the Readers Club, 1941), 348.

¹⁴³ Robert Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," in *American Civil Religion*, Russell E. Ritschey and Donald G. Jones, eds. (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 31.

¹⁴⁴ Manchester, *The Death of a President*, 624.

Richard Nixon: Don't Think, Feel (Pt. 2)

Another president whose obituary remains open, who is continuously exhumed, is Richard Nixon. In death as in life, Nixon is a shape-shifter. R.W. Apple, Jr. wrote in his obituary of Nixon, “Again and again, Mr. Nixon reinvented himself – so much so that people talked and wrote about ‘the new Nixon’ and the ‘the new, new Nixon.’”¹⁴⁵

Nixon is a man with nine lives, an American Rasputin. While it may appear self-evident that resigning the presidency of the United States would be tantamount to political death, after all of the political deaths Nixon had returned from, who was to say that he couldn't come back from this one, as well? When one recalls all of the losses Nixon had faced at the hands of the American electorate, is it really so strange that perhaps he thought he could bounce back from this one, too?

We may acknowledge these “new” Nixons, but we do not necessarily take new iterations of Nixon seriously. Nixon did many things. The mini-biography prepared by the United States Government Printing Office for a book of memorial tributes given in Congress listed his many accomplishments as succinctly as possible. It deserves quotation in full:

In 1952 General Eisenhower selected him as his running mate. He was Vice President for eight years. After losing to John F. Kennedy by a razor-thin margin in 1960 and then making an unsuccessful bid for governor of California in 1962, he practiced law, wrote, and traveled extensively in Europe and Asia.

He was elected President in 1968 and won reelection in 1972 by an historic margin. While in office he opened the door to the People's Republic of China, established the policy of détente with the Soviet Union, ended American involvement in Vietnam, and pursued domestic

¹⁴⁵ R.W. Apple, Jr., “37th President; Fierce Cold Warrior Who Later Reached Out to Soviets and China,” *New York Times*, 23 April 1994.

initiatives that included establishing the Environmental Protection Agency, launching the “war on cancer,” and bringing about the peaceful desegregation of public schools in the South. He made four appointments to the Supreme Court, including the current Chief Justice, William Rehnquist.

After he resigned the Presidency in August 1974 to save the nation further anguish over Watergate, the President and Mrs. Nixon returned to their home in San Clemente, where they lived until they moved east in 1980.”¹⁴⁶

If this biography made up foundation for our idea of “Nixon,” then Nixon masks would not be sold by costume shops at Halloween. If we think of American history as an agreed-upon fiction (or at least, as having a narrative structure imposed extrinsically), then we can assign different historical figures to their appropriate roles. Richard Nixon played a specific character in the American political narrative before he ever even became President. He had been cast as the Villain as early as 1952.

In 1952, Eisenhower was on the verge of dropping Nixon from the Republican ticket the news media began questioning the legitimacy of an \$18,000 fund Nixon used for political purposes. California businessmen and regular party contributors had set up the fund two years prior to allow then-Senator Nixon to conduct political activities year-round. It was entirely ethical, but the *New York Post* saw fit to call it a “‘millionaire’s club’ devoted exclusively to the financial comfort of Senator Nixon.”¹⁴⁷ Both the *Washington Post* and the *New York Herald Tribune* called for Nixon to offer his resignation to Eisenhower. Although Eisenhower could have easily verified Nixon’s explanation for the fund, he (probably rightly) had greater concern about the public’s interpretation of the scandal. He told Nixon that he needed to sway *their* opinion if he

¹⁴⁶ *Memorial Services in the Congress of the United States and Tributes in Eulogy of Richard M. Nixon, Late a President of the United States*, (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1996), vii.

¹⁴⁷ Richard Nixon, *Six Crises*, (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1962), 81.
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was to stay on the ticket.¹⁴⁸ Nixon and his team scrambled to prepare a television program during which he would account for, literally, every penny that had passed through his fingertips since he had become a public figure. But at the eleventh hour, he got word that no matter the success of the presentation, Eisenhower was going to request his resignation. He made the agonizing decision to “fight the battle.”¹⁴⁹ This might be the end, but Nixon would go out fighting.

On September 23, 1952, he won the battle. He appeared on network television and in 30 minutes delivered his now-famous “Checkers” speech, in which he explained his personal finances in agonizing detail. The performance was a hit. Public response was so overwhelming that Eisenhower was forced to acknowledge the change, and met him on the tarmac at the Wheeling, West Virginia airport and called him, “my boy.”¹⁵⁰ Nixon had escaped death for the first time. He wrote that some people speculated it was because of that broadcast that he lost the presidency in 1960. Nixon’s reply: “If it hadn’t been for that broadcast, I would never have been around to run for the presidency.”¹⁵¹ As would from then on be the case, a new Nixon was enough to escape death but not enough to start fresh. His career would evolve, but his legacy would not.

After eight years in the White House, Nixon felt qualified to run for the presidency. He obviously had more experience than the junior senator from Massachusetts, a man who seldom even showed up for roll call votes. But Kennedy could benefit from his inexperience; the voter could only judge him on what he said, not

¹⁴⁸ Wills, *Nixon Agonistes*, 102.

¹⁴⁹ Nixon, *Six Crises*, 97.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 123.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 129.

what he had done.¹⁵² As the incumbent, Nixon was in the defensive position, by his own admittance not his preferred role. It did not help that he was trying to defend a man who seemed to be doing little to defend him. President Eisenhower remained aloof from the campaign, offering several reasons for his absence. He wanted Nixon to establish his own identity. He wanted to be the leader of everyone, not a foot soldier of partisan politics. And then, there was his health. President Eisenhower had survived a grave heart attack in the fall of 1955, and did not need unnecessary strain. But to an outsider, it looked like something else was wrong with his heart – it just didn't seem to be in campaigning. When asked in a press conference whether he could name any accomplishment of his vice-president during their years in the White House, Eisenhower said off-handedly, "If you give me a week I might think of one. I don't remember."¹⁵³ Although both Nixon and Eisenhower publicly said that the remark had been a facetious aside taken out of context, it certainly didn't help Nixon's cause.

Nixon, had brought himself back from political near-oblivion through the medium of television in 1952, was brought down by it in 1960. To any student of political communication, Nixon's missteps in the first presidential debate can be ticked off like items on a grocery list: he wore pancake make-up to hide his five o'clock shadow, his suit blended into the background, he sweat too much, he nodded too much, he didn't stand up straight. That these gaffes all have equally oft-repeated explanations (he had a fever, he had had a serious infection in his knee, the Kennedy team had a hand in the temperature and lighting of the room) makes the whole thing more pathetic. Gary Wills

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 307.

¹⁵³ "The President's News Conference of August 24, 1960," *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, Dwight D. Eisenhower, 1960-61*, (Washington: United States Government Printing Office: 1961), 658.

wrote in *Nixon Agonistes* that it was typical of Nixon's bad luck that history would chalk his loss up not to his ideology, but to "bad make up."¹⁵⁴ In his seminal book covering the 1960 election, *The Making of the President*, Theodore White wrote, "It must have been impossible, seeing him just once at a railway station, not to want to comfort or to help this man who, like so many of his listeners, was one of life's losers."¹⁵⁵ The trope of Nixon-as-loser seems a little overblown for an election that was one of the closest in the twentieth century. Statistically speaking, Nixon was not the woebegone underdog of the 1960 election, yet this is how he is remembered and how he is taught.

In November 1962, two years after his narrow defeat by Kennedy, Nixon made an unsuccessful bid for the governorship of California. At the press conference following the loss, Nixon, against the advice of his handlers, approached the microphone and told the press, "You won't have Nixon to kick around anymore, because, gentlemen, this is my last press conference."¹⁵⁶

Surely this was the death rattle. Only a few days later, ABC broadcast an episode of the *Howard K. Smith: News and Comment* show titled "The Political Obituary of Richard Nixon." Over the next few years, he kept a low profile and did the work of rebuilding the Republican party that no one else wanted to do.

Then, in 1968 Richard Nixon became the only person in the twentieth century to lose the presidency and later come back and win it. And win it *twice*. Theodore White wrote of the "new" Nixon of 1968:

His greatest adversary was always a past Nixon whose image stained the minds of millions of Americans; his greatest victory, since 1960, has been his ability to

¹⁵⁴ Wills, *Nixon Agonistes*, 6.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 302.

¹⁵⁶ Nixon, *The Memoirs of Richard Nixon*, (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1978), 245.

learn, to persist, to master what it was he did not know, and then, finally, to understand himself.

Nixon did not win the presidency because America preferred him to Hubert Humphrey. He didn't win because the Democratic party had splintered into a hundred pieces. He didn't win because the nation was desperate for new leadership during an unbearable war. No, he won because there was no man "more willing to admit mistakes or learn from error!"¹⁵⁷ White was a great admirer of John Kennedy, and therefore, his characterizations of Nixon are condescending almost by requirement. But the sense that Nixon was a loser, even when he was a winner, showed up again and again until his death. The Watergate scandal only provided the perfect evidence for a reputation already twenty years old.

Despite his considerable foreign policy expertise, Nixon's resignation prevented his appointment to any official political posts. So, Nixon influenced politics through writing. As one of his obituaries puts it, "From then on, every word he wrote, every public act, was directed to rehabilitating his record for history."¹⁵⁸ Although he had written in *Six Crises*, "I may begin another book, but I will never finish it," he, in fact, wrote nine of his ten books out of office, and contributed dozens of articles to newspapers and magazines.¹⁵⁹ In the twenty years out of office, he tried to recast himself as elder statesmen, with debatable results.

When Nixon died on April 22, 1994, it was a critical moment for his legacy. How would he be remembered? In his post-presidency, and especially at the time of his death,

¹⁵⁷ White, *The Making of the President 1968*, 428.

¹⁵⁸ John Herbers, "In Three Decades, Nixon Tasted Crisis and Defeat, Victory, Ruin and Revival" *New York Times*, 24 April 1994.

¹⁵⁹ Nixon, *Six Crises*, xii.

“his admirers and defenders stood steadfastly by him in death, as in life, glossing over Watergate, the most prominent entry on his career ledger. They focused, instead, on the second most prominent entry, his handling of foreign affairs, especially the diplomatic opening to China.”¹⁶⁰ His supporters took bold strides. Bob Dole, speaking at Nixon’s funeral, said, “I believe the second half of the twentieth century will be known as the age of Nixon.”¹⁶¹ President Clinton requested that, “the day of judging President Nixon on anything less than his entire life and career come to a close.”¹⁶²

Although we speak of the new Nixon, and the new, new Nixon, will popular memory ever flip the switch from “Watergate” to “China,” despite the strongest efforts of so many to emphasize Nixon’s diplomatic legacy? Gerald Ford said in 1998 that he believed, “History’s not gonna treat [Nixon] very well. He’s getting better treatment today that I think historians will give him.”¹⁶³ Nixon’s *New York Times* obituary credits him with foreign policy accomplishments of “historic proportions that proved beyond the reach of his Democratic foes,” but at the same time acknowledges that American politics “has never fully recovered” from the Watergate scandal.¹⁶⁴

We will probably never flip that coin. When thinking of Nixon, no word will ever come quicker to mind than “Watergate.” But while his legacy may be static, the story is good enough that it keeps Nixon alive. There is only one other twentieth century president whose story is similar in that way. And that man is Kennedy.

¹⁶⁰ B. Drummond Ayres, Jr., “In Death as in Life, Nixon Provokes Strong Passions” *New York Times*, 23 April 1994.

¹⁶¹ *Memorial Services in the Congress of the United States and Tributes in Eulogy of Richard M. Nixon, Late a President of the United States*, 7.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁶³ DeFrank, *Write It When I’m Gone*, 106.

¹⁶⁴ Apple, Jr., “37th President; Fierce Cold Warrior Who Later Reached Out to Soviets and China.”

It seems a crude analysis at the outset, but the Kennedy myth and the Nixon myth are linked, if only by their incongruity. Nixon's dissimilarity with Kennedy has ensured him his own kind of immortality. As we have invested in the concept of Kennedy's success, we have invested in the concept of Nixon's failure. If Kennedy is enveloped by glamour, Nixon is warped by insecurity. Kennedy, brought down by an assassin's bullet over which he had no control, stands in stark contrast with Nixon, brought down by a political assassin of another kind – a House that would have inevitably impeached him had he not resigned in the fray surrounding Watergate, a situation of his own making.

In 1975, William F. Buckley wrote about the contrast between Nixon and Kennedy as that between the archetypal villain and the hero:

President Kennedy is more or less accepted as the other end of the social, intellectual, and moral spectrum from Richard Nixon. He is accepted as the kind of man Boy Scouts should be encouraged to dream about as Chief Executive while Richard Nixon is the man who becomes President in the world of Charles Addams, where all dreams are nightmares, all jokes macabre, all reactions sick.¹⁶⁵

The divine means nothing without the mundane. If Kennedy is to be seen as a political god, then Nixon must be held up as the foe. As long the myth of Kennedy sticks around, his enemies will be kept alive.

The election of 1960, possibly the most important battle of either man's life, binds Kennedy and Nixon to either other. Because Kennedy won by such a slim margin, this contest can never fully be finalized, never fully resolved. The election of 1960 was by many accounts devoid of content or crisis. Kennedy and Nixon agreed on the major needs of the country, only differed in their approach. It is not just their polarity that links

¹⁶⁵ Buckley, Jr., *Execution Eve and Other Contemporary Ballads*, 164.

these men together, for it must be remembered that on one day, the nation was torn between the two.

Theodore White wrote,

Somewhere it has been written that no human contact ever takes place without leaving some permanent mark, however microscopically small or apparently undetectable, on the two personalities in contact: hunter and hunted upon each other, lover on lover, child on parent and parent on child. The mark of John F. Kennedy was seared into Richard M. Nixon in 1960; it continues to surface even now, as he runs for President in 1968.¹⁶⁶

In *Nixon Agonistes*, Gary Wills writes that it is better to be associated with the ghost of Camelot than not associated with it at all.¹⁶⁷

Both the Kennedy story and the Nixon story have skipped over history to become myth, in large part because of the controversy, the scent of conspiracy that surrounds each man. The final verdict on both Nixon and Kennedy is continually delayed by our lack of facts. For Kennedy, this refers to the endless number of conspiracy theories surrounding his death – theories ranging from the possible (“second gunman” theory) to the occult (alien abductions, witchcraft) – and the inconclusive nature of evidence like Abraham Zapruder’s video and the twenty-six volumes of supporting documents published by the Warren Commission. For Nixon, this has to do with the dark shadow that envelops Watergate. The facts surrounding Nixon are never going to be known simply because much of the crucial evidence was retained (or destroyed) by Nixon, himself. Because Nixon was pardoned before he was ever brought to trial, we will never really know how guilty or how innocent he was. (Incidentally, Gerald Ford played a role in turning both these events into conspiracies, as a member of the Warren Commission and as the Man Who Pardoned Nixon).

¹⁶⁶ White, *The Making of the President 1968*, 131.

¹⁶⁷ Wills, *Nixon Agonistes*, 7.

Much of the Kennedy and Nixon stories is up to the imagination. The staying power of both the Kennedy and the Nixon dramas can be measured (albeit unscientifically) by their continued appearance in pop culture. Both narratives have enthralled Hollywood. Watergate, which contained major and minor characters just as good as any Hollywood epic, has brought audiences to the box office starting almost immediately after Nixon's resignation and continuing through the new millennium. With varying agendas, *All the President's Men* (1976), *Nixon* (1995), *Dick* (1999), and *Frost/Nixon* (2008) all try their hand at staging Watergate or exposing Nixon's psyche. Kennedy is reimagined in *JFK* (1991), *Thirteen Days* (2000), and *Bobby* (2006). This brief list leaves out the musicals, the novels, and the *Simpsons* references. Are there many Johnson movies? How many Ford movies will there be? And even though Reagan was a film actor, how many movies will be made about our oldest president? Nixon and Kennedy dominate the entertainment market because both narratives leave such a wide berth for interpretation.

Conclusion: Historical Actors

Because Ronald Reagan died so recently, it is hard to gauge how history will treat him. In his post-presidential life, he did relatively little, but served as “the physical embodiment” of a tax cut and a conservative ideology that continued to guide the Republican Party through the new millennium.¹⁶⁸ Yet as this political philosophy seems to be losing some of its popularity, it is not clear how we will view his political legacy.

Beset by Alzheimer’s Disease soon after leaving office, Reagan used the disclosure of his illness as an opportunity to further cement his place in public memory. On November 5, 1994, in an open letter to “my Fellow Americans,” Reagan wrote, “I now begin the journey that will lead me into the sunset of my life. I know that for America there will always be a bright new dawn ahead.”¹⁶⁹ Reagan then disappeared from the public eye for the last decade of his life, with no new words or actions to alter the image he had worked hard to create of a rugged, wood-chopping President. He died on June 5, 2004, at the age of 93.

One of Reagan’s legacies is precisely that he had a bulletproof legacy. Sometimes referred to as the “Teflon President,” with his charm and his good looks – and some say, his experience as an actor – Reagan could “escape blame for political disasters for which any other president would have been excoriated.”¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁸ Thomas Schaller and Thomas Williams, “The Contemporary Presidency: Postpresidential Influence in the Postmodern Era,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 33, no. 1 (2003), 188-200, 196.

¹⁶⁹ Ronald Reagan, “Text of Letter Written by Ronald Reagan Announcing He Has Alzheimer’s Disease,” 5 November 1994. Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, National Archives and Records Administration. <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/reference/alzheimerletter.html>. Accessed 4 April 2009.

¹⁷⁰ Marilyn Berger, “Ronald Reagan Dies at 93; Fostered Cold-War Might and Curbs on Gov’t,” *New York Times*, 6 June 2004.

Reagan, “the Great Communicator,” was a master of the political soundbite, of associating himself with images of success, and of linking himself to accomplishments that might have only incidentally had to do with him. Either he was a master negotiator or he simply had good timing: the Iranian hostage crisis which so afflicted Jimmy Carter was brought to an end within minutes of his inauguration, and while Cold War negotiations were carried out by every U.S. president for the past half-century, “wherever credit was due, the thaw came on his watch.”¹⁷¹

His death was a media event of unexpected proportions. The televised state funeral was a “pageant over two decades in the making,”¹⁷² which faithfully executed the 300-page funeral plan prepared by the Reagan family.¹⁷³ The viewing at the Reagan Presidential Library in Simi Valley, California attracted so many people that the approaching miles to the library, which would ordinarily take 90 minutes, took six hours. One person who came to pay her respects said, “The story of Reagan is the story of America, one of manifest destiny.”¹⁷⁴

The outpouring of affection for Reagan at the time of his death was different than the kind of emotions expressed at the deaths of Nixon, Johnson, or Kennedy. “Unlike John F. Kennedy, who was struck down in office, or Lyndon B. Johnson, whose body reposed in the Rotunda while the wounds of the Vietnam War were still raw, Mr. Reagan died at 93 after a decade with Alzheimer’s disease and a rich life long enough to see the

¹⁷¹ Berger, “Ronald Reagan Dies at 93; Fostered Cold-War Might and Curbs on Gov’t,”

¹⁷² Alessandra Stanley, “A Pageant Over 2 Decades in the Making,” *New York Times*, 10 June 2004.

¹⁷³ Elizabeth Bumiller and Elizabeth Becker, “Down to the Last Detail, a Reagan-Style Funeral,” *New York Times*, 8 June 2004.

¹⁷⁴ John M. Broder and Charlie LeDuff, “100,000, one by one, pay tribute to a President,” *New York Times*, 10 June 2004.

fruits of his dreams and policies, good or bad.”¹⁷⁵ The political climate in June 2004 was conducive to fond memories of the President. Alessandra Stanley for the *New York Times* wrote “the surge of admiration is also a sign that the country is hungry for a moment of unity and shared experience.”¹⁷⁶

Although many came together over Reagan’s death, many did not. The director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force wrote on the organization’s website, “Even on this day I’m not able to set aside the shaking anger I feel over Reagan’s nonresponse to the AIDS epidemic or for the continuing anti-gay legacy of his administration.”¹⁷⁷ Julian Bond, chairman of the NAACP said, “Everyone wants to extend sympathy to his family, but when you remember the actual record, it’s a very, very different story.”¹⁷⁸

In the final days of Eisenhower’s presidency, a *New York Times* editorial read, “[the President] in the quietest of times, is a symbol of emotions, and in times of stress a storm center round which sweep the great winds of fear and hope. But the man himself can rarely be the same as the image.”¹⁷⁹

Every president has a list of achievements. And every president, even those made of Teflon, suffers losses in public approval ratings. Neither of these things is directly correlated to how we will remember a president. The stories we tell about our presidents are stories of real experiences, mixed with projections of our own beliefs about the past and hopes for the future. It is the way we incorporate the president into myth and then, into tradition, that will decide how history will absorb – or abuse, or absolve – him.

¹⁷⁵ Todd S. Purdum, “The Capital Pays Homage to ‘a Great and Gallant Man,’ *New York Times*, 10 June 2004.

¹⁷⁶ Stanley, “A Pageant Over 2 Decades in the Making.”

¹⁷⁷ Robin Toner and Robert Pear, “Critics See a Reagan Legacy Tainted by AIDS, Civil Right and Union Policies,” *New York Times*, 9 June 2004.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁹ “The Five Days,” *New York Times*, 15 January 1961.

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