

THE POLITICS OF SANITY: VIETNAM, WATERGATE AND THE PSYCHOLOGICAL AFFLICTIONS OF PRESIDENTS

Jon Roper

Department of American Studies, University of Wales, Swansea, UK

Abstract

Critics of Presidents Johnson and Nixon have argued that psychological deficiencies contributed to the political debacles of Vietnam and Watergate, endorsing the myth that John F. Kennedy, a more well-balanced leader, would have avoided their mistakes. This article considers how, through biography, psychobiography, and in analyses of institutional and constitutional structures, such critics suggest that Johnson and Nixon were able to reach the White House with their individual neuroses intact, with disastrous results for their conduct in office. This image of the psychologically disturbed president is then considered in relation to popular culture, with particular reference to Oliver Stone's film biography of Nixon. The conclusion is that these portrayals of Johnson and Nixon allow the responsibility and the blame for the nation's defeat in Vietnam, and for the constitutional excesses of Watergate, to be seen as forms of aberrant behaviour rather than as examples of the ways in which America's Cold War preoccupations impacted not only upon its foreign policy but also upon its political and constitutional processes.

Key Words: Presidents, Vietnam, Watergate, Psychological Profile