

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

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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

“With America’s sons in the fields far away, with America’s future under challenge right here at home, with our hopes and the world’s hopes for peace in the balance every day, I do not believe that I should devote an hour or a day of my time to any personal partisan causes or to any duties other than the awesome duties of this office—the Presidency of your country. Accordingly, I shall not seek, and I will not accept, the nomination of my party for another term as your President.”

—Lyndon B. Johnson

“I have never been a quitter. To leave office before my term is completed is abhorrent to every instinct in my body. But as President, I must put the interests of America first. . . . To continue to fight through the months ahead for my personal vindication would almost totally absorb the time and attention of both the President and the Congress in a period when our entire focus should be on the great issues of peace abroad and prosperity without inflation at home. Therefore, I shall resign the Presidency effective at noon tomorrow.”

—Richard M. Nixon

On March 31st 1968, in announcing that he would not be a candidate for re-election, Lyndon Johnson resigned from the American presidency in just as an effective manner, if not as spectacularly, as did his successor, Richard Nixon, some six years later. He left the White House with his Great Society rioting in the streets: his ambition to be regarded as the greatest president since Franklin Roosevelt crushed by war in Vietnam. Two years earlier, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. had published *The Bitter Heritage* as part of an attempt, co-ordinated with two other Kennedy stalwarts, Richard Goodwin and John Kenneth

Galbraith, to stir American public opinion against Johnson's prosecution of the war. Despite his opposition to LBJ's policy in Southeast Asia, at that time Schlesinger wrote that "the Vietnam story is a tragedy without villains."¹ In his subsequent work, however, notably his biography, *Robert Kennedy and His Times* (1978) and his earlier analysis of *The Imperial Presidency* (1973), he finds scapegoats in Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon, the two presidents who were responsible for America's escalated military commitment to, and subsequent withdrawal from, Vietnam. And he characterises—even pillories—these two chief executives in the language of psychological disturbance.

In so doing, Schlesinger moves beyond the contemporary analysis of David Barber, who, in *The Presidential Character* (1972), set out to demonstrate that "active-negative" presidents, among whom he counted both Johnson and Nixon, were the least suitable personalities to elect to the White House. And yet, at the core of Schlesinger's—and indeed Barber's—view is the assumption that, had John F. Kennedy survived, America would not have persisted in its "mission impossible" in Southeast Asia. By implication, too, had Robert Kennedy not been assassinated, Nixon would not have been elected in 1968, and the crimes and misdemeanours of Watergate would not have occurred. In other words, the appeal of such counter-factual history is apparently confirmed through an examination of the personalities and psychological make-up of those held most directly responsible for Vietnam and Watergate.

This article thus looks at the way in which portraits of both

¹ Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *The Bitter Heritage: Vietnam and American Democracy, 1941-1966* (Greenwich: Fawcett, 1968 edition), pp. 58-59.

Johnson and Nixon have been drawn to suggest that their character deficiencies contributed to the traumatic foreign and domestic debacles of the 1960s and 1970s. It examines the way in which Barber's argument works to endorse the view that, when confronted by the Vietnam War, Kennedy would have been a far more effective leader than either of his two immediate successors. It considers how, through biography and psychobiography, as well as in analyses of institutional and constitutional structures, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., along with—among others—Doris Kearns, George Reedy and Fawn Brodie, endorses the idea 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 view of the psychologically disturbed president is one which has permeated popular culture as well, notably in 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.

There are, then, many different accounts of why America failed in Vietnam.² Yet the characterisation of LBJ and Nixon as unhinged by war and Watergate is one which has resonated in historical and biographical works, given further credence

² These interpretations, by no means exhaustive of the arguments, are summarised and illustrated in Jeffrey Kimball, *To Reason Why: The Debate About the Causes of U.S. Involvement in the Vietnam War* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1990).

through repetition and rebuttal.³ This portrayal of paranoid presidents has to do with a concern to avoid Vietnam and the collapse of the “imperial presidency” contaminating the Kennedy mystique. But it is not simply that. It enables Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., for example, to reconcile his earlier support for an aggressive Cold War resistance to threatened communist expansionism, and his desire for a heroic leader in that struggle, with his later opposition to the war in Southeast Asia and his critique of an executive out of control.⁴ And it becomes a potent variation on David Barber’s theme that individual character is a prime factor in determining how different presidents approach their task.

The Question of Character

The Presidential Character (1972), first published just prior to the revelations of the Watergate scandal, became one of the

³ See, for example, Waldo Heinrichs, “Lyndon B. Johnson: Change & Continuity,” in W. Cohen & N. Tucker (eds.), *Lyndon Johnson Confronts the World: American Foreign Policy, 1963-1968* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Tom Engelhardt, *The End of Victory Culture: Cold War America and the Disillusioning of a Generation* (New York: Basic Books, 1995); Irving Bernstein, *Guns or Butter: The Presidency of Lyndon Johnson* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), especially the conclusion. H. R. Haldeman, *The Ends of Power* (New York: New York Times Books, 1978), is the source for the often quoted “madman theory” applied to Nixon. For a deconstruction of this argument, see Joan Hoff, *Nixon Reconsidered* (New York: Harper Collins, 1994).

⁴ As an example of his initial view of the Cold War, see Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1949). Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: ‘Objectivity’ and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 341, describes this as Schlesinger’s “anti-Communist Manifesto.”

most influential studies of the interactions between presidential personality and performance in the role of chief executive. Barber's categorisation of presidential character as a combination of the four polarities implied by active/passive and positive/negative personality traits was used not only to judge but also to predict. So "active-positive" presidents enjoy the job and are good at it. In contrast, "active-negatives" are presidents whose personalities may be at once the most fascinating and the most dangerous. For them, being president becomes an end in itself: theirs is a struggle to achieve and maintain power. "Active-negative types pour energy into the political system, but it is an energy distorted from within." Then there are those presidents who are "passive-positive." They suffer from low self-esteem: they may be good presidents, but they derive little personal satisfaction from their position. Finally, if presidents are "passive-negative," they are persuaded into public service only out of a sense of civic duty. The conclusion, then, is that "the relation of activity to enjoyment in a President thus tends to outline a cluster of characteristics, to set apart the well adapted from the compulsive, compliant and withdrawn types." For Barber, the first four chief executives of the United States neatly illustrate all of his typologies. George Washington and John Adams were respectively "passive-negative" and "active-negative"; then came the "active-positive" Thomas Jefferson, and the "passive-positive" James Madison.⁵

In considering contemporary presidents, moreover, Barber sees both Johnson and then Nixon as "active-negative" charac-

⁵ James David Barber, *The Presidential Character: Predicting Performance in the White House* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1972), pp. 11-14.

ters: presidents whose personalities were such that they would stubbornly persist with courses of action which were demonstrably self-defeating, with devastating consequences both for themselves and the nation. One of the core arguments in the first edition of *The Presidential Character* is that Vietnam happened because Johnson's character was inadequate to his task: proof indeed that "the primary risk in electing an active-negative character to the Presidency is the risk of disaster, of one man's personal tragedy plunging the nation into massive social tragedy."⁶ In subsequent editions of the work, Nixon, too would be included in such an assessment.

Barber's case against Johnson is buttressed by his belief that if Kennedy had survived, things would have been both different and better. "Like Harry Truman and Franklin D. Roosevelt, John Kennedy was an active-positive President. The central adaptive strength of that character is the sense of the self as developing, demonstrated externally in evidence of openness, experiment, flexibility, and growth."⁷ JFK would thus have been far better equipped psychologically to handle the problem of Vietnam than was his successor. Moreover, "to those who attribute the Vietnam disaster to 'the system,' to some institutional inevitability in the American government, there is a hard question in the Johnson history. What was it in the system that made John Kennedy determined to withdraw from Vietnam after what he hoped would be his re-election in 1964?"⁸

Yet this begs another question: what evidence is there that

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 319.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 32-33.

Kennedy actually intended to abandon America's Cold War commitment to contain communism in Southeast Asia during his second term? Barber's prediction is based upon the report of a conversation the president had with Senator Mike Mansfield in the spring of 1963; his commitment, made in October, to withdraw 1,000 American troops from South Vietnam by the end of the year, "despite hard objections by some of his advisors"; and comments he made to two aides in November, just before his trip to Dallas.⁹ But to take this as firm evidence that Kennedy would have avoided Johnson's fate is, at the least, debateable.

In the spring of 1963, JFK may have seen an end to America's military commitment in Southeast Asia. Certainly, in talking in that vein to Mike Mansfield, he was seeking to re-assure a political ally who had become disillusioned with America's support for Ngo Dinh Diem's regime in Vietnam. As that regime began to disintegrate, however, and by October of that year, Kennedy's political calculus might have been changing. Thus, according to the statement in which it was announced, the decision to recall some troops was made because the military situation at that time warranted it: "by the end of this year, the U.S. program for training Vietnamese should have progressed to the point where 1,000 U.S. military personnel assigned to South Vietnam, can be withdrawn." But it was observed too that "the political situation in South Vietnam remains deeply serious. The United States has made clear its continuing opposition to any repressive actions in South Vietnam. While such actions have not yet significantly affected the military effort, they could do in the future." William Bundy, one of Kennedy's principle defence

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 337.

advisers, later pointed out the “clear internal inconsistency” in this statement: “the finding on the one hand that political reforms were unlikely to occur, and the conclusion on the other that withdrawal could begin.”¹⁰ So the future of America’s commitment in Southeast Asia was perceived at the time as fluid, and would become more so after the coup and assassination of Diem early in November 1963. In this context, Kennedy’s suggestion to his aides, made just prior to his own assassination and quoted by Barber, that he could withdraw from the region while maintaining American prestige there simply by putting “a government in there that will ask us to leave,”¹¹ may have been more a flippant remark rather than a statement of serious intent. Indeed, as McGeorge Bundy, Kennedy’s National Security Adviser, recalled: “up to the day of President Kennedy’s death, no one in the policy circle suggested seriously that the U.S. start to think in terms of withdrawing with the task unfinished.”¹² And by November 1963, there was a growing realisation that America’s “task” in Vietnam might be far from over.

Nevertheless, Barber’s argument is illustrative of a theme taken up and explored by others. The assumption is made that Kennedy would not have allowed the “tragedy” of America’s involvement in Vietnam to happen. Johnson is thus held responsible not only for a policy which was manifestly proven wrong, but for adhering to it when most others had abandoned the cause. To act with such perversity suggests that his personality must have been in some way significantly flawed. For Barber,

¹⁰ William Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War, Part II: 1961-1964* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), pp. 185-186.

¹¹ Barber, *The Presidential Character*, p. 337.

¹² Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War*, p. 205.

indeed, he was “a prime example of the active-negative type” whose defects of character would lead him to commit this fatal error.¹³ Others would go further, and suggest that Johnson’s problems were not simply ones of character, but were the outcome of a psychological condition which manifested itself in growing presidential paranoia: an affliction which he shared with his successor, Richard Nixon.

In the 1972 edition of his book, Barber argued that “Nixon’s is a special variant of the active-negative character . . . when a crisis gathers around him . . . and he experiences a sense of entrapment . . . [he is] likely to move towards the classic form of rigidification.”¹⁴ The prediction seemed to anticipate the president’s behaviour when confronted by the Watergate scandal. And in his subsequent analysis of that event, in later editions of his work, Barber himself explores the idea that once Nixon confronted the defining crisis of his political career, he became psychologically disturbed. So Nixon “may well have been” mentally unbalanced as his presidency unravelled. Moreover, “near the end, as his political defenses crumbled, so did his psychological defenses. Then Nixon revealed the fragility of his self-esteem, the fear and trembling which lay hidden behind his mask of stoic toughness. At the end he was drinking heavily, sleeping sporadically, often enraged and raging, frequently out of touch with the reality gathering around him; by one report he was a weeping, staggering, irrational man.” This portrait of a president under seige, a portrayal of psychological disintegration under stress, is based primarily on the speculative account given by Nixon’s

¹³ Barber, *The Presidential Character*, p. 93.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 441-442.

nemeses, the journalists Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein in their version of *The Final Days*, and Theodore White's assessment that immediately prior to his resignation, the president's aides were involved in "the management of an unstable personality."¹⁵

Whatever the provenance of these characterisations of presidential neurosis and psychological instability, their attraction for those who wish to preserve the myth of Kennedy's Camelot, for those who are impressed by counter-factual interpretations of the history of the 1960s, and for those appalled by the constitutional crimes and misdemeanours of Watergate are self-evident. The argument is straightforward. Vietnam becomes an egregious error, and the Watergate scandal which flowed from it a political aberration. The presidents who countenanced such events must thus have had significant flaws in their characters. A retrospective diagnosis of executive neurosis—with a hint, indeed, of insanity—is thus useful in helping to explain the apparent absence of rational judgments and the suspension of moral sensibilities during a critical period in American history. There is also the implied speculation: that if John F. Kennedy had lived, or indeed if Robert Kennedy had won the White House in 1968, events would have been handled not simply in a different way, but with significantly better outcomes.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 145, 147. See also, Bob Woodward & Carl Bernstein, *The Final Days* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1976); and Theodore White, *Breach of Faith: The Fall of Richard Nixon* (New York: Atheneum Publishers, 1975).

The Shadow of the Kennedys

Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon are presidents whose political reputations were wrecked, not simply by Vietnam and Watergate, but also because of the enduring appeal of the Kennedys. To their political opponents, they became presidents by default. In normal times, neither might have expected to succeed to the White House. Indeed, it is tempting for their critics to believe that the assassinations of first John and then Robert Kennedy robbed America of two heroic leaders who would have steered the nation through the crisis of its involvement in Vietnam, and thus avoided the constitutional debacle of Watergate (which simply would not have occurred). Thus, Bernard Brodie in *War and Politics* (1973) offers one such perspective on the role of chance in shaping history. For “when a man like Lyndon B. Johnson can become President of the United States by virtue of the fact that an otherwise insignificant person full of rage happened to be able to fire a rifle bullet accurately, or another some five years later can achieve the authority because he won by a majority of 313,000 popular votes with only 43 per cent of the electorate, that victory being partly the result of a second assassination, then surely we are dealing with a large measure of caprice.”¹⁶ It may be, of course, as capricious to assume that Jack Kennedy might have dodged the bullet in Dallas, or that his brother would inevitably have defeated Nixon in the election of 1968. But Brodie is concerned to make the case that Vietnam would not have been such an intractable problem had both

¹⁶ Bernard Brodie, *War and Politics* (New York: Macmillan, 1973), extract in Kimball, *To Reason Why*, pp. 187-188.

Kennedys survived.

Thus, it is “next to impossible to imagine . . . President Kennedy stubbornly escalating the commitment (to Vietnam) . . . and persisting in a course that over time abundantly exposed its own bankruptcy.” JFK had “a far more subtle intelligence” than LBJ. Similarly, Richard Nixon, Brodie asserts, was unflinching in his commitment to the domino theory, with all its implications for America’s policy towards Vietnam. And of course Nixon only became president because of the death of Bobby Kennedy, who otherwise would “very likely have won the Democratic nomination and also the election.” So “the United States at a crucial stage in its history has been the victim of cruel and capricious chance . . . two small bullets have cost the American and the Vietnamese people exceedingly dear—the rifle bullet that killed President John F. Kennedy and the .22 calibre pistol bullet that five years later took the life of his brother.”¹⁷ The argument relies more upon faith than logic. Yet for obvious reasons it appeals to those who also have contributed to the creation of the myth that the Kennedys could and would have rescued the country from the debacle of Vietnam and avoided a scandal such as Watergate. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. describes Brodie’s book as “brilliant.”¹⁸

For Schlesinger, moreover, the random chance of assassination not only deprived the nation of the heroic presidential leadership of first Jack and then, potentially, Bobby Kennedy. Left in their shadows was first Lyndon Johnson, and then Richard

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 196-198 *passim*.

¹⁸ Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *Robert Kennedy and His Times* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1978), p. 968.

ard Nixon, both of whom he characterises as paranoid. In taking Brodie's analysis a stage further, he effectively re-inforces the idea that the Kennedy assassinations in some way warped the course of American politics. Neither brother showed signs of the mental instability that he suggests affected the judgment of those who became presidents only by default. If they had survived, therefore, it is only natural to assume that the politics of sanity would have kept America from sinking further and further into the quagmire of Vietnam and would have avoided the constitutional crisis precipitated by Watergate. Schlesinger supports his assertions that LBJ and Nixon had psychological afflictions with anecdotal evidence from members of the Johnson White House, from a psychobiography of LBJ, and by drawing on the analysis of George Reedy, again a former Johnson aide, in his book, *The Twilight of the Presidency* (1970). In different and separate ways, however, each of these sources may be both questioned and questionable.

The Paranoid Style of LBJ

Consider, then, Schlesinger writing about Lyndon Johnson in the latter stages of his presidency. His analysis is based upon his reading of the manuscript of Doris Kearns' book, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream* (1976), together with interviews with two former Johnson aides, Richard Goodwin and Bill Moyers. So, "in private, as the Vietnam debate grew more bitter, the President became driven, irascible, inflamed by wild suspicions. . . . White House aides, Doris Kearns wrote, 'were frightened by what seemed to them signs of paranoia.' The president would enter into a compulsive monologue, punctuated by ir-

relevant laughs: . . . It was hard to make out. Was this merely an eccentric mode of relaxation? Or did he really believe what he was saying? If the latter, Goodwin and Moyers wondered what could be done. They thought of asking for psychiatric investigation. But, as Goodwin said, he would just talk calmly and rationally to a panel of psychiatrists, 'and everyone would think we were the ones who were crazy.'"¹⁹ Schlesinger's portrait of Johnson is of a beleaguered president, besieged in the White House, and maddened by the war.

One of his sources for this assessment is Richard Goodwin. In a previous work Schlesinger described him as "the archetypical New Frontiersman" who, apart from Theodore Sorensen "was Kennedy's best writer."²⁰ Uneasy in his dealings with JFK's successor, Goodwin worked formally in the Johnson White House for only nine months, leaving in September 1965. Three years later he would help Eugene McCarthy in the New Hampshire primary election before joining Robert Kennedy's presidential campaign team. An ardent Kennedy supporter, then, he broke with Johnson early over the issue of Vietnam. His reminiscences on the state of LBJ's mind were given to Schlesinger in an interview some twelve years after the event.

Goodwin's discussion with Bill Moyers was a conversation with another disillusioned Johnson aide. Moyers had been an assistant to LBJ during his time in the Senate, but he was, according to David Halberstam "a Kennedy-style Texan," who during JFK's administration became deputy director of the Peace Corps.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 775.

²⁰ Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (London: Andre Deutsch Ltd., 1965), pp. 192, 598.

As a presidential aide to Lyndon Johnson, Moyers “showed his own doubts on Vietnam largely by encouraging other doubters to speak and by trying to put doubters in touch with one another.” Having replaced George Reedy as Johnson’s press secretary in 1965, he became “a casualty of the war . . . wounded at Credibility Gap” and left the White House during the following year.²¹

So in recounting this assessment of Johnson’s paranoia, which appeared sufficiently worrying to have his aides wondering whether to seek psychiatric help, Schlesinger is relying upon the testimony of two committed anti-war Kennedy supporters, whose views are coloured not simply by their experience of working for Johnson, but also because of their fundamental disagreements with him about his policy on Vietnam. Yet equally supporting—and damaging—evidence of the way in which the Vietnam War and the pressures of the presidency worked upon Johnson’s psyche is given by his other source, Doris Kearns. The account of the president’s rambling monologue is taken from Kearns’ psychobiography of Johnson. That work, then, appears to add further weight to Kennedy’s friends’ speculation as to LBJ’s mental health.

Freud and Lyndon Johnson

Kearns’ relationship with Lyndon Johnson was complex. A doctoral student at Harvard and an anti-war activist, she joined the White House staff on a fellowship programme in 1967. She

²¹ David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (London: Pan, 1974), pp. 53, 603, 777.

remained as a member of the president's personal entourage when he left the White House, helping him work on his book of memoirs. She married Richard Goodwin. In 1976, she published *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream*, a work which, by the standards of presidential biographies, is possibly unique. The president, in his retirement, talked to his biographer because "I reminded him of his dead mother. In talking with me, he had come to imagine he was also talking with her, unraveling the story of his life."²² The book suggests that Johnson was a willing accomplice to psychotherapy in recounting some of his recurrent dreams: such material allows Kearns to use "psychiatric knowledge . . . as a means of understanding the formation of Johnson's behavior."²³

The greatest formative influence in his life was his mother. Thus, "from his position of primacy in his mother's home, Johnson seemed to develop what Freud has called 'the feeling of a conqueror, that confidence of success that often induces real success.'²⁴ But he still had to grapple with what Freud considered to be the common challenge to the individual's psyche:

²² Doris Kearns, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), p. 18.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 22. In taking this approach, Kearns is imitating the techniques employed in another attempt at a "psychological study" of a president: the controversial and speculative collaboration between Sigmund Freud and William Bullitt, *Thomas Woodrow Wilson, Twenty-eighth President of the United States: A Psychological Study* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson 1967). David Barber characterises Wilson as another "active-negative" president. The evolution of a "psychoanalytic culture" in times of political and social dislocation, is discussed by Sherry Turkle, *Psychoanalytic Politics: Jacques Lacan and Freud's French Revolution* (New York: The Guildford Press, 1992).

²⁴ Kearns, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream*, p. 25.

“every human newcomer has been set the task of mastering the Oedipus complex. . . . Whoever cannot manage it falls prey to neurosis.”²⁵ Kearns implies that LBJ’s difficulty in sublimating his Oedipal desires resulted in a president traumatised by this self-induced psychological affliction emanating from his upbringing. She infers from a childhood dream of Johnson’s, in which he found himself paralysed in the face of stampeding cattle, that “the boy’s paralysis presents one solution, albeit powerful, to the fear of acting out the forbidden Oedipal wish to eliminate the father and take the mother.”²⁶ Johnson sought preferment in deference to the future imagined for him by his mother. In Kearns’ biography, he reaches the White House with the neurosis which stemmed from his early psychological development intact: a crucial factor which will impact on his mental health as he succumbs to the stresses of fighting an unpopular war in Vietnam.

Retrospective Freudian psychoanalysis may suggest that Woodrow Wilson “slipped many times towards neurosis, [and] . . . finally toward the end of his career he nearly plunged into psychosis.”²⁷ So too, apparently, did LBJ. Kearns makes the connection between the two presidents explicit. In recurrent dreams which followed his heart attack in 1955, and again after the Tet offensive in 1968, Johnson “became” Woodrow Wilson. “In the dream, he [LBJ] was lying in a bed in the Red Room. His head was still his, but from the neck down his body was dead, victim of that paralysis which had held both Wilson and his

²⁵ Quoted in Peter Gay, *Freud: A Life for Our Times* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1988), p. 332.

²⁶ Kearns, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream*, p. 32.

²⁷ Freud and Bullitt, *Thomas Woodrow Wilson*, p. 55.

grandmother in their final years. In the next room, he could hear all his assistants squabbling over who would get what parts of his power. He could neither talk nor walk and not a single aide tried to protect him." As president, and terrified by this dream, Johnson developed a ritual. "Lying in the dark, he could find no peace until he got out of bed, and, by the light of a small flashlight, walked the halls of the White House to the place where Woodrow Wilson's portrait hung. He found something soothing in the act of touching Wilson's picture; he could sleep again. He was still Lyndon Johnson, and he was still alive and moving; it was Woodrow Wilson who was dead."²⁸ LBJ, wandering the corridors of the executive mansion, haunted by the war and the ghosts of presidents past, is glimpsed here as an irrational figure, psychologically afflicted if not deeply disturbed.

According to Kearns, therefore, Johnson's decision "to go into Vietnam covertly, with force and with overtures of benevolent intentions, was an act of will that almost seems to sum up the character of the man."²⁹ As opposition to the war mounts, she portrays the president as walking a psychological tightrope, displaying signs of "obsessional, delusional thinking . . . creating a fantasy world of heroes and villains." After the monologue which Schlesinger reproduced, Kearns comments that "sometimes it seemed as if Johnson himself did not believe what he was saying, as if all the surmises were a bizarre recreation, a way to relax. But at other times Johnson's voice carried so much conviction that his words produced an almost hypnotic effect." This obsession with the conspiracy he thought surrounded him came

²⁸ Kearns, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream*, pp. 23, 342.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 284.

came to dominate LBJ's life, and all but destroyed his grasp upon reality. Moreover, the institutional framework of his presidency contributed to his paranoid style. "In typical circumstances, of course, people who slip into fantasy are quickly set straight by the adverse criticism of those around them, which forces them to face the truth. In Johnson's White House there were no such correctives. To the contrary, his every self-deception was repeatedly confirmed in the men around him."³⁰

Kearns documents LBJ's fear of paralysis, fear of rejection, fear of being alone; his craving for affection, his competitiveness, both political and sexual; his deceit, conceit, energy and ambition. These traits can be interpreted by his critics as contributions to Johnson's personal and political style: brought in his decision to commit more and more resources to the Vietnam War and in his method of prosecuting it. But Kearns' Freudian reading of Johnson as president is also a comprehensive illumination of both the creative and the destructive impulses of his compulsive personality. And it allows Schlesinger, for example, also to question the president's sanity as the Vietnam War impacted upon him.

The Institutionalisation of Neurosis

Kearns' argument that there was no countervailing force within the White House that could jerk a delusioned president back to reality owes much to George Reedy, who resigned as Johnson's press secretary during the escalation of the Vietnam

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 317.

War. In *The Twilight of the Presidency*, he suggested that the institution itself was a magnifying glass which would reveal any latent neuroses affecting its incumbent. And although he does not explicitly describe Johnson as mad, the thought of LBJ is never far from mind. Thus “in the Senate . . . even the most neurotic of personalities must make some obeisance to reality”³¹ because political accommodations have to be reached among and between the hundred members. This, then, was an arena in which Johnson had been held in check: indeed one in which he had been able to excel. The executive branch is different, its incumbent isolated, remote, but preternaturally able to dominate the political process.

In such a situation, Reedy argues, “a highly irrational personality, who under other circumstances might be medically certifiable for treatment, could take over the White House and this event never be known with any degree of assurance.”³² Moreover, this is not a remote possibility. “Politics and neurosis are inextricably mingled because the neurotic personality is usually more articulate and more logical in expressing stands on the great issues of the day. . . . What keeps most political leaders from rushing headlong into catastrophe is the fact that their own neurotic drives must clash with the neurotic drives of others and in the conflict certain forms of social sanity are bound to emerge. The presidential office, however, exists in an environment which is free of many of the restraints with which all other political leaders must contend. . . . It is certain that whatever neurotic

³¹ George Reedy, *The Twilight of the Presidency* (New York: The New American Library Inc., 1970), p. xi.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 160

drives a president takes with him into the White House will be fostered and enhanced during his tenancy.”³³

So all politicians are potentially neurotic, and indeed the more successful the politician the deeper the neurosis may be. In an institution like the Senate, the American system of checks and balances works to the extent that politicians have to interact with each other, for out of collective neurosis, “social sanity”—whatever that may be—can emerge. But the president, free from the need to sublimate psychological affliction to achieve political objectives, can give full reign to whatever fantasy life he takes with him to the White House. The structure of the institution encourages the indulgence of neurosis. Reedy’s argument provides an institutional context for Kearns’ psychological investigation and for Schlesinger’s portrayal of a paranoid president.

According to Reedy, therefore, “the problem of the unbalanced president is on the minds of every close observer of the political process,”³⁴ and not least, once again, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. For Reedy’s suggestion that a neurotic personality held in check in the Senate might give full expression to a dysfunctional personality in the White House might apply not only to Lyndon Johnson. Richard Nixon too moved from the legislature to the executive, albeit by a more circuitous route. And Nixon in the White House, together with the drama of the Watergate scandal, led Schlesinger to write his well-received and often quoted analysis of *The Imperial Presidency*.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 165-166.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 161-162.

The Paranoid Emperor

In an article published in *Encounter* in December 1960, a month after Kennedy had won the presidential election, Schlesinger ostensibly wrote about the problem of political leadership in the developing world, but the image of the president in waiting appears to underly much of what he has to say. He argued that classical democratic theory has a problem with the concept of leadership: Lockean ideas of majority rule, and the egalitarian ethic that underpins the ideal of democracy tend to denigrate the role of the leader. But whatever the theory, in practice the United States has recognized “democracy’s functional need for leadership” from the founding period onwards.³⁵

It is when his discussion moves to a moral justification for strong leadership, however, that Schlesinger conflates the idea of the hero with the idea of the leader, and anticipations of Kennedy in the White House can be teased from his argument. Writing in a Cold War idiom which emphasised the dichotomy between democratic concepts of free will, and marxist beliefs in historical determinism, Schlesinger proposed that “the heroic leader has the Promethean responsibility to affirm human freedom against the supposed inevitabilities of history. As he does this, he combats the infection of fatalism which might otherwise paralyse mass democracy. Without heroic leaders, a society would tend to acquiesce in the drift of history. Such acquiescence is easy enough; the great appeal of fatalism, indeed, is as a

³⁵ Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., “On Heroic Leadership and the Dilemma of Strong Men and Weak Peoples,” *Encounter*, Vol. 15, No. 6 (Dec. 1960), pp. 3-11, 4.

refuge from the terrors of responsibility.”³⁶ The heroic leader can operate, in certain circumstances, even beyond the pale of constitutional government. Faced with crises of “war, revolution, or economic chaos,” the heroic leader should take command, for “what makes short-run authoritarianism possible in . . . the United States is precisely the strength of the antecedent tradition of liberty,” which will reassert itself after the crisis has passed.³⁷ Thirteen years later, with Nixon about to leave the White House, the problem for Schlesinger is clear. The wrong leader has been in charge: hence the analysis of *The Imperial Presidency*.

The book is a commentary on the presidency as an institution during the 1960s and early 1970s, against the background of the Vietnam War, when Schlesinger’s support for Kennedy and the idea of heroic leadership had changed to a suspicion of Johnson’s illegitimate use of the presidential prerogative in pursuing the war. Nixon’s conduct in the presidency confirmed the continuing corruption of the nation’s political process. Watergate becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. “Nixon was carrying the imperial presidency toward its ultimate form in the plebiscitary Presidency with the President accountable only once every four years, shielded in the years between elections from congressional and public harassment, empowered by his mandate to make war or to make peace, to spend or to impound, to give out information or to hold it back, superseding congressional legislation by executive order, all in the name of a majority whose choice must prevail till it made another choice four years later—unless it wished to embark on the drastic and improbable course of

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10.

impeachment.”³⁸ For Schlesinger, Nixon’s presidency had re-written the rules of the republican democratic game.

Max Weber argued that a plebiscitary democracy works when a charismatic leader is able to build a genuine political constituency among the populace. In Schlesinger’s version, it fails when its leader does not have the personal qualities that can confer charismatic authority. *The Imperial Presidency* is thus also a lament for the contemporary absence of charismatic leadership in America—and the subtext of the argument is plain. Had JFK not been assassinated or had his brother survived in 1968 to beat Nixon in the election, reinheriting the legacy that Johnson had both usurped and corrupted, the book need not have been written.³⁹ The imperial presidency therefore self-destructs because of Nixon’s character: the emperor is paranoid.

To make this point Schlesinger re-works elements of George Reedy’s analysis. He had written, indeed, a “brilliant and influential book”: *The Twilight of the Presidency* is “the first sustained analysis of the office in its imperial phase.”⁴⁰ Given his belief in strong, charismatic executive leadership, Schlesinger cannot go as far as Reedy in describing the presidency as an institution which inevitably magnifies the idiosyncracies, eccentricities and obsessions of its incumbent. However, he agrees that when a neurotic president takes office there is a unique op-

³⁸ Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *The Imperial Presidency* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989 edition), pp. 254-255.

³⁹ For a discussion of Schlesinger’s use of Weberian concepts of democracy, see Jon Roper, “Richard Nixon’s Political Hinterland: The Shadows of JFK and Charles de Gaulle,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol. xxviii, No. 2 (Spring 1998), pp. 422-434, 431-432.

⁴⁰ Schlesinger, *The Imperial Presidency*, p. 214.

portunity to indulge those neuroses. In other words, Schlesinger refines Reedy's argument to suggest that the White House isolates only those presidents who wish to become so gregarious and well-balanced incumbents such as Franklin Roosevelt and John F. Kennedy—his heroes—are not prey to such temptation.

In contrast, Nixon, as an imperial president, found the office "the perfect shield and refuge." His self-imposed isolation is the outcome of "compulsive internal drives" and a "psychological need for exemption from the democratic process."⁴¹ Although Schlesinger himself finds "speculation about motivation . . . ordinarily unprofitable," in this case he can make an exception: "because Nixon's destiny was to carry the logic of the imperial Presidency to the point of no return, one cannot avoid pondering why he did things it never occurred to Truman or Eisenhower or Kennedy or even Johnson to attempt."⁴² Nixon's White House represented the "enthronement of unreality" and "the president, it could only be supposed, suffered from delusions of persecution." Following ". . . the needs and drives of his own agitated psyche . . . his private obsessions pushed him towards the view that the Presidency could set itself, at will, *above* the Constitution."⁴³ In 1960, Schlesinger had argued that such conduct in a national emergency was a legitimate extension of executive leadership. But different times had called forth different leaders: Nixon, like Johnson before him, was psychologically afflicted. "Remembering the ease of access to the President in other White Houses—Roosevelt's and Kennedy's for exam-

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 216.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 217.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 222, 230, 267.

ple—one could only wonder at the intense psychic compulsions that led Nixon to establish so rigid and, in the end, so predictably self-deceiving and self-defeating a procedure” as to leave him so aloof from the American political process.⁴⁴

As the Watergate scandal unravelled his presidency, Schlesinger’s suggestions of neurosis and paranoia were supplemented by more in-depth assessments of the president’s psyche. Like his predecessor, Nixon became an interesting case for psychobiographers. Again, there is a method in this approach. If the constitutional crisis precipitated by Nixon’s administration can be shown to be a question of individual character, it implies that any sense of collective responsibility for the creation of a political culture in which morality might be routinely sacrificed to expediency is expunged.

The Madness of Richard Nixon

For Bernard Brodie, “the personality and character of some of the greatest figures of our national history have until now persistently eluded their biographers.” This is because most biographers “live in a world unsullied by any of the psychological notions developed by Freud and others.”⁴⁵ And yet, as with Kearns’ Johnson, Freudian analysis may reveal the apparently fatal flaws in a political personality. While there is the sense in which LBJ, by relating his dreams to his biographer, tacitly co-operated in the psychoanalytic portrait which she was able subsequently to draw of him, assessments of Richard

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 223.

⁴⁵ Brodie, *War and Politics*, extracted in Kimball, *To Reason Why*, p. 188. Brodie was, he wrote, aware of this because of the work of his wife, Fawn Brodie, who was then writing her psychobiography of Thomas Jefferson.

subsequently to draw of him, assessments of Richard Nixon's psyche must remain a matter for conjecture. This has not prevented a number of them being made. Of these, one of the most complete was written by Brodie's wife. And like Kearns' treatment of Johnson, Fawn Brodie's *Richard Nixon: The Shaping of His Character* (1981) is replete with Freudian language and imagery and speculative psychoanalysis.

"The warping in his capacity for love, and the influence of death in his life, are examined in this volume in detail, as is the evolution of Nixon's lying. All three themes are interwoven with his identity failure and with the grandiose fantasy life."⁴⁶ Thus Brodie traces Nixon's problems directly to his childhood, with chapters entitled 'The Punishing Father,' 'The Saintly Mother' and 'The Unsmiling Child.' The traumatic death of two brothers—both more loved and loveable than he—is a formative experience in Nixon's early life, and one which curiously foreshadowed his own political ascent to the presidency, which was in part a consequence of the assassinations of John and Robert Kennedy. "What one does not know," observes Brodie, "is whether or not Nixon suffered from an anxiety that the fate helping him was demonic and not divine."⁴⁷

Elsewhere in the book, however, she offers anecdotal evidence that "a personal feeling of guilt for the death of an assassinated leader can haunt even the innocent." The basis for this remarkable generalisation is a footnoted reminiscence: "one of my students confessed that he was consumed with remorse be-

⁴⁶ Fawn Brodie, *Richard Nixon: The Shaping of His Character* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 25.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 507.

cause by accident he had accompanied a friend who took his gun to the home of Siran (sic) Sirhan and sold it to him. The gun was shortly used to assassinate Robert Kennedy. Had the student somehow blocked the sale, he thought, he would have had a decisive impact for good on history. By not blocking it, he had inadvertently had an evil impact.”⁴⁸ Whether that evil impact was simply the assassination, or the subsequent election of Nixon to the presidency is left unsaid. But this story is the foundation for the inference that Nixon, too, was consumed with guilt as a result of the deaths of the Kennedys.

Brodie’s speculations about Nixon’s mental health include the suggestion that, while vice-president, he sought psychiatric help from a physician in New York. “Dr. Arnold A. Hutschnecker, later called—not altogether incorrectly—‘the President’s shrink,’ was not a psychiatrist but an internist specializing in psychosomatic problems, in what he called ‘the emotional conditions—the mystery, tension, the unhappiness,’ of his patients. Later he called himself ‘a psychoanalytically oriented psychotherapist.’” Made aware of the political implications of his actions, Nixon abandoned his visits to Hutschnecker, who subsequently wrote in a book entitled *The Drive for Power* (1974): “how strange . . . that a man in public life would be allowed, even encouraged, to visit a heart specialist, say, but would be criticized for trying to understand the emotional undercurrent of his unconscious drives, fears, and conflicts, or possible neurotic hangups.”⁴⁹ It is a naive view. Any suspicion of mental health problems would have been politically disas-

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 392-393, 543.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 331-332.

trous—in 1972, one factor which helped to undermine the credibility of George McGovern’s ill-fated radical challenge to Nixon’s second term was the revelation that his initial vice-presidential choice, Thomas Eagleton, had been treated for nervous exhaustion and depression with electric shock therapy. The implication of Brodie’s account is clear: even as vice-president, Nixon’s mental health was suspect. Guilt is established by innuendo. Speculation masquerades as analysis. The pitfalls of psychobiography are revealed: as Bruce Mazlish suggests: “the effort to cast doubt on Richard Nixon’s mental stability by vague accusations that he visited a psychotherapist in the late 1950s itself indirectly cast doubt on psychological history.”⁵⁰ For Doris Kearns, Lyndon Johnson’s childhood neurosis accompanied him to the White House, where, under the pressure of events, it produced a psychological disturbance. Brodie’s portrait of Nixon goes further in hinting at psychological problems known about prior to Nixon becoming president. Unlike Johnson, Nixon did not need to be driven mad by his time as chief executive. He could walk.

Nixon’s speechwriter, Ray Price, in his book *With Nixon* (1977) describes meeting a prominent New York psychiatrist, David Abrahamson, who was researching a work on the former president. “As we talked, it became apparent that he was planning to follow the current fashionable trend of psychohistory, interpreting a public official’s acts by means of a sort of remote-control Freudian psychoanalysis.” The danger in this, for Price, is that political prejudice suggests that anything the subject

⁵⁰ Bruce Mazlish, *The Leader, the Led and the Psyche* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1990), p. 200.

does which is offensive to the psychobiographer becomes “irrational,” and is explicable only in the language of psychological affliction. As Price observes, “so much for the sanity of politics, and the politics of sanity.”⁵¹ And yet he misses a point. For the language of Freud is a way of attempting to understand not simply character but also causation and motivation. As such, it is a good vernacular for the dramatisation of both history and biography. Enter Oliver Stone.

Celluloid Heroes: *JFK* and *Nixon*

“Some came to believe that if John Kennedy had lived and won a second term, the politics of America would have been much different and the nation would not have passed through the Indochina Agony. . . . In Freudian terms, for Stone President Kennedy is transformed into an imago who would have warded off the evil and difficulties his generation and others passed through.”⁵² This comment, from the *American Historical Review* forum on the movie, *JFK* (1991), is suggestive of the way in which, through popular culture, the idea that had Jack lived, Vietnam would have been neither so traumatic nor so disastrous is disseminated. In Oliver Stone’s version of the event, the mythology of the assassination contributes to the myth of Kennedy himself.

Stone’s portrayal of a vast conspiracy, of which Johnson too was a part, to kill Kennedy because he intended to withdraw

⁵¹ Raymond Price, *With Nixon* (New York: The Viking Press, 1977), pp. 19-20.

⁵² Marcus Raskin, “*JFK* and the Culture of Violence,” *American Historical Review*, Vol. 97, No. 2 (Apr. 1992), pp. 487-499, 490.

American forces from Vietnam is suggestive of a paranoid style run wild. As John Hellmann puts it “viewed in terms of historical fact, the revelation of Vietnam as the motivation for Kennedy’s assassination is the most ludicrous aspect of Stone’s film.” But “Stone chooses this explanation because it mythically constructs a powerfully simple version of the more complicated, ambiguous conclusion that things would have been better if Kennedy had lived.”⁵³ It is in such simplification and exaggeration of the earlier suggestions of David Barber, Bernard Brodie and others that the popular appeal of the movie lies. When Stone turns his attention to a film biography of Richard Nixon, moreover, it is unsurprising that he embarks on a similar treatment of the historical record based upon the selective interpretation of certain myths.

Fawn Brodie’s work is one of the sources cited in the annotated screenplay of Stone’s movie *Nixon* (1995). And the film presents a portrait of the president which is illuminated with obvious references to pop-psychology, notably in the constant use of flashbacks to relate the mature Nixon’s conduct to memories of his fractured childhood. As he observes the shipwreck of his presidency on the mounting tide of Watergate revelations, Nixon at one point confesses to Bob Haldeman that he had come to the presidency “over the bodies . . . four bodies.” The film suggests that although his political triumph may have come in the aftermath of the Kennedy assassinations, his drive for power was fueled by the loss of his siblings in childhood. And in a line that is clearly reminiscent of Brodie’s speculation as to

⁵³ John Hellmann, *The Kennedy Obsession: The American Myth of JFK* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), pp. 160, 161.

whether Nixon considered the accidents of fate that led him to his goal were benign or malevolent, Stone's president asks "who's helping us? Is it God? Or is it . . . Death?"⁵⁴

Like Johnson prowling the corridors in search of portraits of his predecessors, the film also has Nixon talking to the pictures of presidents past. As he listens to the tape of his conversation with Bob Haldeman, where he has revealed his belief that the price of his election has been the deaths of his brothers and the Kennedys, Nixon is seen in the Lincoln sitting room. Drunk, he looks up at the portrait of Abraham Lincoln to interrogate him about death: "how many did you have? Hundreds of thousands . . . Where would we be without death, hunh Abe?"⁵⁵ The president who had saved the nation through the catharsis of Civil War had done so with his reputation and his sanity intact, and now is to be counted among the audience: silent witnesses to the mental disintegration of his successor in the White House.

Later, as Nixon is about to resign, he is shown alone, and talking to another portrait, this time of JFK. He tells his assassinated predecessor; "when they look at you, they see what they want to be. When they look at me, they see what they are."⁵⁶ Given the fact that Nixon, as in his conversation with Lincoln's portrait, is alone in his encounter with the painting, some dramatic licence necessarily has been taken with the historical record. Nevertheless, the image of the beleaguered president talking to pictures is a powerful one, and one which has become part of the mythology of Nixon's presidency. One such ac-

⁵⁴ Eric Hamburg (ed.), *Nixon: An Oliver Stone Film* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996), pp. 183-184.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 184.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 303.

count—which helped inspire Stone’s scene—is Fred Emery’s *Watergate* (1995), which suggests that Nixon spent his last hours in office walking the corridors of the White House with the lights turned out. But Emery then goes on to argue that the claim which the former president makes in his memoirs “I was not afraid of knocking into anything in the dark”—is an “evident rebuttal to stories that had him wandering around talking to pictures.”⁵⁷ It seems a curious connection to make: why should the ability to navigate the corridors of power with the lights out have anything to do with a tendency to interrogate the pictures on the walls?

Once more, though, it is the image from Stone’s movie which stays in the mind. For if Nixon’s psychological health has suffered through Watergate, then suggestions of a distracted president conversing with the ghosts of his predecessors do not seem misplaced. The idea of a psychologically afflicted president is instantly recognizable to audiences familiar with the Freudian vernacular of pop culture psychoanalysis. Stone’s portrait of Nixon thus resonates with what Ray Price terms “symbolic truth”: an interpretation which is “hailed as true by those who want to believe it true.”⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Fred Emery, *Watergate: The Corruption and Fall of Richard Nixon* (London: Random House, 1995), p. 478. Stone’s other sources for the scene were Bernstein and Woodward’s *The Final Days* and Jonathan Aitken’s, *Nixon: A Life* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing, 1993). The myth endures. See Christopher Ogden, “Coming to an Airstrip Near You,” *Time* (European edition), Jan. 17, 2000, p. 43: “can anyone see Bill Clinton . . . padding around the empty family quarters and oddly quiet West Wing offices, talking to presidential portraits, as Richard Nixon did in his final days?”

⁵⁸ Price, *With Nixon*, p. 356.

Conclusion: The Politics of Sanity

Soon after he had inherited the presidency, Johnson had privately expressed his determination not to “lose” Southeast Asia as China had been “lost.” “Mr. Johnson’s war” followed. Far from drawing a line under his predecessor’s military adventurism, Nixon defined his political purpose publicly in a hauntingly familiar fashion. In 1969 he told Republican congressional leaders that “I will not be the first president of the United States to lose a war.” Tom Engelhardt, in *The End of Victory Culture* (1995) suggests that “nothing drove America’s Vietnam presidents, Johnson and Nixon, more ruthlessly than the desire to avoid that most infamous of humiliations. For both, it was an inconceivable fate and yet, to the point of obsession, impossible to stop thinking about. Both, facing the spectre of defeat, embraced a very unpresidential madness.”⁵⁹ For Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon the pressures of Cold War leadership, in particular during the war in Vietnam, created tensions within the presidency that made their mental health the subject of both commentary and debate. Engelhardt’s assertion of presidential insanity is the unsubstantiated repetition of an allegation that has gained currency from the testimony of some survivors of the New Frontier, from psychobiography, and from the speculation of those whose faith in presidential leadership was undermined by the war.

So did Johnson and Nixon “crack up” as Vietnam and Watergate defined the progress of the “imperial presidency” from

⁵⁹ Engelhardt, *The End of Victory Culture* (New York: BasicBooks, 1995), p. 202.

the optimism of the New Frontier to defeat in Southeast Asia? What is apparent is that it suits both Kennedy's most ardent admirers, as well as a number of anti-war activists—and sometimes they are one and the same—to promote this as a possible explanation for the tortuous path taken by American politics during the 1960s and early 1970s. For if Johnson and Nixon both had distinctive personality disorders that rendered them incapable of tackling the political tasks with which they were confronted, then the Kennedy myth remains untainted by the failure of the nation in Vietnam, and the war itself is the direct result of the irrational intransigence of his two immediate successors.

Robert McNamara still believes “that we made an error not of values and intentions but of judgment and capabilities” in entering the Vietnam War.⁶⁰ The decision to fight in Southeast Asia was the product of a particular set of ideas which influenced America's leaders during the Cold War. It was a vision which historians such as Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. did much to shape, and public servants like McNamara did much to implement. But Vietnam fractured America's political consensus along a fault-line which emerged after Kennedy's death, when there was a growing realisation that perhaps the nation's missionary zeal and military activism in support of the doctrine of containment and the threat of falling dominoes was misplaced. Kennedy did not have to deal with that changing reality. But both Johnson and Nixon were stuck with their support for a version of American history, and its consequences in terms of the nation's mission in Vietnam, at a time when for many, neither history

⁶⁰ Robert McNamara, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1995), p. xvi.

nor mission any longer made sense. The “credibility gap” was not simply that which opened up between what the president said about Vietnam, and what people came to believe was the reality of the situation there. It was also, and more fundamentally, related to the capacity of the consensus history of the 1950s, with its emphasis on the need to maintain the “vital center,” and with its reassuring celebratory versions of America’s past, to continue to convince the nation that it indeed represented the “last best hope for mankind.”

There is no doubt that the interior logic of the Cold War made sense to those whose ideas were influenced by such a view, not least Kennedy himself, who famously articulated it in his inaugural address. It was the “mission impossible” of Vietnam which reflected an exterior reality onto such presidential rhetoric. And it was the “imperial presidency” which cracked under the strain. How John F. Kennedy might have sustained a national consensus in such a circumstance, or how his brother might have defused the tensions caused by Vietnam can never be known. Instead it was left to the presidents who did achieve office at that time, LBJ and Nixon, to confront the dysfunctional tensions created by the nation’s Cold War convictions.

Characterisations of these two presidents as “active-negative,” as psychologically afflicted or as obsessively and increasingly “paranoid” thus became part of contemporary political debate as commentators such as David Barber, together with Kennedy loyalists—notably Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., but also Richard Goodwin and Bill Moyers—discover an alliance with critics of the war like Bernard Brodie, Doris Kearns, and George Reedy. Their influence can be traced in later works, both biographical and historical, and latterly have been mediated

through popular culture as well—notably the films of Oliver Stone—finding a receptive audience among those who look for scapegoats. Vietnam becomes a tragedy with villains. Watergate is the outcome of a president's paranoia.

The enduring problem with such a view, however, is that it deflects attention from fundamental issues raised by America's policy of containment and the demands it placed upon presidents during the Cold War. As Vietnam in particular demonstrated increasingly the hollowness of ideological posturing and Cold War rhetoric, and Watergate symbolised the excesses of executive power, these commentators and critics have blamed the messengers—those presidents to whom, following JFK, the nation looked for heroic leadership—rather than re-examining the message. For a pre-occupation with the politics of sanity—tempting though the idea of a mad president may be—ultimately remains as a convenient device for deflecting attention from mature analysis of the sanity of policy and the integrity of a constitutional system which, through attempting to frustrate the use of power, may yet encourage its abuse.

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神智健全與政治： 越戰、水門醜聞事件與總統之心神不寧

約翰·羅普爾
(張錦隆譯)

摘 要

美國總統詹森和尼克森的批評者主張，他們在越戰和水門醜聞事件中，所遭逢政治上之困難與阻撓，導因於他們心理狀態之缺陷。這些批評者並且強調，如果換成一個心理較為平衡的領導者，如甘迺迪總統，易地而處，應該可以避免詹森和尼克森的錯誤。這篇論文探討批評者如何藉由總統自傳文獻、有關這些自傳之心理解析，和有關組織制度與憲政結構之分析，來獲致一個結論：儘管這兩位總統之所作所為，在任期內造成災難性的後果，他們卻能夠在競選總統的過程中，保持個人心理狀態大致穩定均衡，不至於爆發精神症的憂懼病癥，而終能入主白宮。然後本文藉由奧立佛史東 (Oliver Stone) 所製作之尼克森傳記電影，主張這個關於總統內心紛擾之心理影像，和大眾文化 (Popular Culture) 有密切相關性。本文的結論是，這些對於詹森和尼克森心理狀態之描繪，使得學者們將越戰中之敗戰經驗與水門事件中之不當憲政醜聞，歸咎於總統心理失衡所產生之異常行為。這兩個歷史事件中的錯誤，並不適合歸因於美國有關冷戰之固有偏執觀感，所造成對於外交政策決策和憲政運作過程的影響。

關鍵詞： 美國總統、越戰、水門事件、心理素描