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Introduction: Richard Nixon and Public Memory

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The Canadian singer-songwriter Neil Young, with obvious ironical intent, once offered a lyric that maintains "Even Richard Nixon has got soul." The significance of Young's song is its demonstration of how over the years Nixon has been othered. At the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery in Washington, DC, a collection of "official paintings" of the American presidents are on display, among them the Norman Rockwell painting of Nixon. In that oil portrait, completed during the tumultuous year of 1968, the thirty-seventh president is casually posed with a faint but pleasant smile, chin resting on hand and the other arm lazily draped over the back of a chair. Whether by the magic of Rockwell's art or the artist's ability to get his subject to let down his barriers, the figure looks very relaxed *and human*. According to the Smithsonian: "Artist Norman Rockwell admitted that he had intentionally flattered Nixon in this portrait. The reason he did, Rockwell said, was that Nixon's appearance was troublesomely elusive ..." (Rockwell). What is strange, and at the same time seemingly fitting for this personality, is that the Rockwell "presidential" portrait was completed *prior* to Nixon being sworn into office as president. Even so, probably the general public is more familiar with Andy Warhol's *Vote McGovern*, consisting of a clownish yet sinister silkscreen image of Nixon's face, green and blue, fixed on an orange background.

Two observations can be made. One, there remains a gulf between a large portion of the public and the public figure Nixon, which is perhaps reflective of a larger phenomenon in American culture: a gulf between all political figures and the people they ostensibly serve. As attested by the ongoing culture wars in the United States, there is a prevailing cynical disregard for public institutions and the officials

who preside over them. "Washington" has been practically reduced to a curse word or, to use a term that came in fashion during Watergate, an "expletive delete." The word "government" has similarly been tarnished. A "chicken or egg" question comes to mind: Is Nixon to blame for this generalized mistrust and dislike of elected officials or is he one of the early victims of some larger cultural change in which America got reduced to a nation of scoffers? His era, it can be noted, is associated with a communications and technological revolution, which has played some role in sparking the culture wars (Hunter 163). Two, for outside observers of American culture, even those who had emphatically been opposed to the Vietnam War, the American ambivalence/animosity toward Nixon seems strange. There is more work to do to understand who Nixon was and what he represented and what he represents more than forty years after he served as US president.

This special *JAST* issue on Richard Milhous Nixon is devoted to focusing on the meaning and legacies, both inside and outside the United States, of this controversial figure in American history and culture. In April 1994, in the eulogy he delivered at Nixon's funeral, President Bill Clinton suggested that Nixon should be judged by everything he did as a public figure and not just the facts about his fall from power. So far, however, Watergate continues to cast a shadow over the remembrances of Nixon. In August 2014, during the marking of the fortieth anniversary of Nixon's dramatic resignation as president, it became evident that his place in American history is very much in dispute. The following articles offer a potpourri of approaches to assessing Nixon.

Nicole Anslover and Seth Studer start the series by offering analyses of emerging perspectives of Nixon. The Anslover essay compares and contrasts global and domestic perspectives of Nixon. She considers factors such as media portrayal, scholarly assessments, and public opinion as well as Nixon's own efforts to rehabilitate his public memory. Anslover concludes that the international remembrance of the Nixon presidency, which is primarily based on American foreign policy during the time of détente, remains relatively positive. In the assessment of world opinion, Nixon's greatest achievement was establishing diplomatic relations with China. Studer chiefly focuses on how Nixon has been remembered in literature. His article considers pertinent works of Gore Vidal, Philip Roth, Thomas Pynchon, Robert Coover, and so on. Studer observes a retreat from postmodernism

and a return to realism in how writers have fleshed out the persona of Nixon. This is due in part to the reliance on the Nixon White House tape recordings, which inadvertently make this former president uniquely "empirically accessible." In the process Nixon is at times reduced to a mime and gets portrayed as "demonic" as well as a figure with a heightened sense of paranoia. In addition, he is often caricatured as a middle-class failure. Whether or not this constitutes Nixon once again being "kicked around" (as he famously complained of the media), it is fascinating how many important writers have been inspired to utilize the nonfiction Nixon for experimental fiction.

The politically clever or shrewd Nixon is explored in articles by Marta Rzepecka and Craig A. Kaplowitz. Drawing largely on primary sources, these two authors offer snapshots of a wily Nixon as he engages in foreign and domestic affairs. Examining the use of Nixon's rhetoric in pursuing a realpolitik Cold War foreign policy, Rzepecka analyzes pertinent White House speeches from 1969 to 1972. Her research teases out the calculation of Nixon as he, with the help of Henry Kissinger, went about reshaping US-Soviet relations while keeping his Russian rivals off balance and his domestic critics confused. Demonstrated is a purposefulness behind Nixon's actions backed by a rhetorical strategy. (Johannes Kadura, in his analysis of Nixon's approach to Vietnam, reaches a similar conclusion about this president's purposefulness.) Offering a savvy perspective on race politics by drawing on White House archival sources, Kaplowitz demonstrates Nixon's strategic approach in how he reached out to Hispanics, predominately Mexican Americans. Kaplowitz shows how Nixon, using the Great Society in a different way and to Republican advantage, courted Mexican Americans, a traditional Democratic constituency, for the purpose of enlarging the GOP base. As Kaplowitz writes, "Opening the door to those 'others' could result in new policies and programs to make the government more responsive to possible new Republican constituents, such as Latinos, even while driving a wedge in the old Democratic coalition and allowing for criticism of programs created and overseen by Nixon's Democratic predecessors." This research reveals that Nixon was in his own manner a civil rights president, albeit not toward African Americans. Just as he galvanized the white vote in Dixie by using race (referred to as "the southern strategy"), Nixon targeted the Southwest by reaching out to Mexican Americans and welcoming them into his party as "whites." The articles of Rzepecka and Kaplowitz reinforce Anslover's observation of

the promising trend of some historians to delve on Nixon's record in both domestic and foreign affairs, producing "tightly focused narratives that are void of the emotions that Watergate still seems to stir."

As a result of conservative dissatisfaction over Nixon's domestic and foreign policies, the New Right came into formation and paved the way for Ronald Reagan (Schneider 126-33). In a Q&A, offering the insights of a scholar who has devoted a lifetime of study to the American presidency, Joan Hoff argues that the fall of Nixon led to an interruption of a progressive trajectory. With her revisionist volume, *Nixon Reconsidered*, Hoff attempted to shift the debate on Nixon in a new direction. Generally, she does not think the reconsideration has gotten much momentum. But Hoff is convinced that a fair reassessment of Nixon would lead to placing him in a higher tier of presidential ranking. Similarly, Roger Chapman suggests in the concluding article that more time needs to pass, at least in the United States, before Nixon and his legacy can be examined dispassionately by the general public. One factor that prevents this from happening is the vast cast of political characters who have been slowly dying off, leaving in their trail long columns of newspaper obituaries that rehash Watergate and the general malfeasance of the Nixon White House years.

None of the above contributors imagine to offer anything definitive, but each believes that Nixon is a figure worthy of better examination. At present, Nixon is too often used as a metaphor of insult, such as when Peggy Noonan asserted that Barrack Obama during his second term was the "loneliest" president in modern memory: "The last time we saw a president so alone it was Richard Nixon, at the end of his presidency, when the Democrats turned on him, the press hated him and the Republicans were fleeing" (346). Such usage of Nixon does not contribute toward any real understanding, but only perpetuates a public memory that reveals more about the present than it does the past president. One could agree with Norman Rockwell that after all of these years Nixon remains "troublesomely elusive."

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