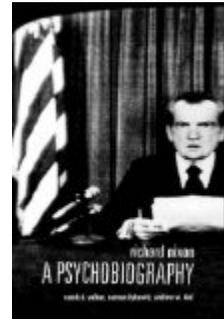


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Vamik D. Volkan, Norman Itzkowitz, Andrew W. Dod. *Richard Nixon: A Psychobiography*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997. xii + 190 pp. \$27.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-10854-6.

Reviewed by William E. Pemberton (University of Wisconsin-La Crosse)  
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Richard Nixon called psychobiography “pure baloney,” (p. 143) and many scholars agree with him. At a 1987 conference on the presidency, Wilbur Cohen, who had served in every presidential administration since Herbert Hoover, told the group: “To be President, you need to have a good mother. The father doesn’t matter. You need a good mother” (p. 143). The audience burst out laughing.

The authors of this psychoanalytic biography believe that Cohen was on the right track. They argue that psychoanalytic understanding of Nixon, or any president, is necessary to fully comprehend his administration: “A person’s actions, decisions, style, and speeches are all influenced by...unconscious drives and defenses against them, by personality organization, and by intelligence and physical condition. Social, legal, military, economic, and historical factors must, of course, be taken into account, in order to see how one’s internal world intertwines with external realities” (p. 144).

Vamik Volkan is a psychoanalyst and specialist in the psychology of international relations; Norman Itzkowitz is a historian with psychoanalytic training; Andrew Dod, a former student of Itzkowitz, conducted interviews with Nixon associates and acted as a catalyst to get this study underway. Volkan and Itzkowitz collaborated on two earlier books, including a psychobiography of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk.

Nixon’s mental processes have attracted psychologically informed studies by, among others, Fawn Brodie, Bruce Mazlish, Blema Steinberg, and James D. Barber and psychologically perceptive biographies by Stephen Ambrose and Garry Wills. Nixon’s own writings and interviews often contained intriguing psychological insights,

as did those of such close Nixon associates as H. R. Halde- man, Henry Kissinger, and John Ehrlichman. Despite the interest in Nixon’s psychology, Volkan, Itzkowitz, and Dod have provided the first detailed psychoanalytic biography. It uses technical psychoanalytic concepts and terminology but is written for the general reader, with most technical discussion relegated to the footnotes.

Nixon prided himself on the cold rationalism he brought to the problem of engineering detente with the Soviet Union or of normalizing relations with China. Yet he also made disastrous miscalculations, such as spreading the Vietnamese War into Cambodia and Laos. He had the 1972 election easily won, but his paranoia set a tone that led to the Watergate break-in and to his politically fatal participation in the coverup that destroyed his presidency. The authors find a pattern of Nixon’s undoing his triumphs by seeking defeat. They search for a “psychic truth” (p. 4) created by his unconscious demands that help explain both his successes and his self-destructiveness.

The authors briefly—the entire book amounts to about 150 pages of text—sketch Nixon’s life, paying particular attention to his early years. His father, Frank Nixon, was a restless, frustrated, and angry man, a mean-spirited person who psychologically abused his five sons and sometimes beat them. Richard’s mother, Hannah Milhous, a devout Quaker, was quiet, honest, industrious, but also reserved, private, and unemotional. Their second son, Richard, born in 1913, entered the Nixon household at a particularly tense time, just after Frank uprooted Hannah from her Quaker community and tight-knit family in Whittier, California, and moved her to nearby Yorba Linda, where he bought a lemon orchard. The move was

financially disastrous and subjected Hannah to anxiety and depression.

Richard Nixon did not receive “good enough mothering” –a key term in the authors’ analysis–not because of any particular failure on Hannah’s part but due to the family’s circumstances. Hannah had three sons born from 1909 to 1914, took in and nursed her sister’s son six months after Richard was born, was hospitalized for a serious operation followed by a long recovery, leaving Richard without his mother at a particularly vulnerable time in his development. During his early life, Richard lived with his relatives at various times, had two brothers die, and had his mother leave home for two years to be with one of his brothers who was dying in Arizona of tuberculosis. This emotional upheaval was taking place in a family wracked by economic insecurity and headed by an angry and abusive father. In these circumstances, “The foundation of Richard’s personality was laid down: overtly, he depended in an exaggerated manner on self-reliance, intellectualism and self-adulation; covertly, he would remain a child of deprivation and physical abuse” (p. 35).

The authors go on to sketch Nixon’s rise to power. He was an intense, driven young man, who, although a loner, took leadership in every setting he entered. He compiled an outstanding record in college and law school, married his attractive and popular wife, Pat, achieved success in law practice and the navy, and rose quickly after WWII to national prominence, first in the House of Representatives, then the Senate, followed by the vice presidency under Dwight Eisenhower. His defeats in the 1960 presidential election and in the 1962 California gubernatorial election revealed another aspect of his personality: his unwillingness–perhaps inability–to accept defeat.

The authors find that the key aspect of Nixon’s early development was the creation of his narcissistic personality, which shaped his later life and career. Healthy narcissism is the foundation for self-esteem and balances independence with dependence on others. But a narcissistic personality is maladaptive and contradictory. On the one hand it consists of an overt grandiose self and on the other a hidden hungry self that is dependent on other people. The grandiose self must be protected at all costs, and, when it is not, the resulting feeling of humiliation leads to rage, envy, and paranoia. “With Richard Nixon,” the authors write, “we see exaggerated narcissism....Nixon organized his personality at such a level that he had an exaggerated need to be ‘number one’ in

his own eyes as well as in the eyes of others, to maintain his self-esteem and to avoid the anxiety of acknowledging his ‘hungry self’ ” (p. 91). These needs can be seen in his drive to collect titles and offices from his high school days on, his need for applause, his obsession with racking up historical “firsts,” his bending truth to maintain his grandiose self, his collecting of White House tapes (useful for supplying his narcissism), his periodic withdrawal into a glass bubble, his dislike of the media (whose probing threatened grandiosity), his psychosomatic disorders at times of crisis.

The authors believe that Nixon’s personality structure produced three political “faces.” His grandiose self generated his first face, that of the bold leader trying to make his place in history by radically reforming the welfare system or by forging an opening to China. His periodic attempts to integrate the divided parts of his personality led to his second political face, to his peacemaking gestures. Here he projected himself as a healer who would reunify a nation deeply divided by conflict over civil rights and the Vietnam War. His second face resulted in Nixon’s move toward detente with the Soviet Union and normalization of relations with China.

“Unfortunately,” wrote the authors, “Nixon could not tolerate success–and he could not maintain an integrated inner world. He had to show his third face” (p. 127). The third face was his paranoid self: “Healing was a big factor in his motivations, as he wanted to heal the splits in his life–i.e., in his personality–between his grandiose self and his hungry self....Unfortunately, he could not maintain his grandiose self and/or his healing activities for long....Whenever he could not maintain his grandiosity, he felt threatened and humiliated by his devalued aspects and was unable to accept them. These devalued aspects he projected onto others (or other things) whom he then distrusted. He frantically attempted to control them and even destroy them. He regressed, and his responses to his regression included paranoid expectations that ultimately contributed to his downfall” (p. 128-29).

His paranoia–stemming from his need to protect his hungry self–led him to install electronic surveillance of various people, including his own associates, to have the Secret Service tap his brother Donald’s telephone, and to create the atmosphere that led to the break-in of Daniel Ellsberg’s psychiatrist’s office, and to the Watergate debacle: “In trying to be greater than everyone else, Nixon stomped where he should have stepped” (p. 149).

The authors conclude: “Richard Nixon could have enjoyed greatness without challenge, but he lost sight of

his priorities because of internal pressures that, paradoxically, had pushed him to excel as a historical figure in the first place. Only with psychoanalytic insight can we grasp why a powerful president would destroy himself when there was no need to do so" (p. 149). He was a Don Quixote tilting at nonexistent windmills, the authors say, and did not understand that he surely was his own worst enemy.

Many scholars will find it difficult to leap from Nixon's lack of "good enough mothering" during childhood to his adult decisions regarding China or his actions

against his political opponents. Still, when scholars factor in all of the relevant political, economic, and other domestic and international pressures operating on Nixon, a gap remains in their explanations of his actions and decisions. The authors help close that gap.

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[The book review editor for H-Pol is Lex Renda <renlex@csd.uwm.edu>]

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