

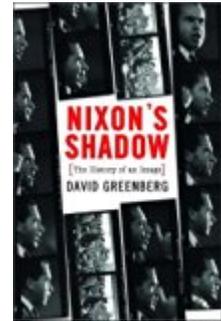
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

David Greenberg. *Nixon's Shadow: The History of an Image*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2003. xxxii + 460 pp. \$26.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-393-04896-4.

Reviewed by Raj Jethwa (Policy Officer, Youth and Regional Affairs, Trades Union Congress, London)

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A Scoundrel for All Seasons

Richard Nixon still manages to evoke a wide range of reactions. The strength of *Nixon's Shadow* by David Greenberg is that we see exactly why Nixon continues to arouse such a variety of emotions in people. Greenberg surveys the perceptions of Nixon, from the dishonored President to the international statesman who ushered in the era of détente between East and West. Greenberg also manages to chronicle shifts in the received view of Nixon from his first entry into politics, through his term of office, to his attempt to resurrect himself as an elder statesman during the 1980s. In documenting these changing perceptions over time, Greenberg helps to record the changing fortunes of liberalism and the new breed of radical intellectual thought that developed during the 1960s.

Nixon's career in politics began with his ultra-conservative smears of opponent Jerry Voorhis, Democratic Congressman from California. It continued with his pursuit of State Department official Alger Hiss when Nixon took Voorhis's seat on the House Un-American Activities Committee. With Nixon's progress and the growth of his public profile, his sights became fixed on a seat in the Senate. His election to the Senate resulted from his victory over ardent New Deal Democrat and friend of Eleanor Roosevelt, Helen Gahagan Douglas. As with Voorhis, Nixon skillfully misrepresented Douglas as soft on Communism. From this period dates the liberal anger and distrust of Nixon which took root and became firmly entrenched among the intellectual establishment. This, then, became the dominant critique of Richard Nixon throughout the 1950s and early 1960s.

Standing as Democratic candidate for President in 1956, Adlai Stevenson delivered a hard-hitting speech penned by John Kenneth Galbraith which described a future of "innuendo, the poison pen, the anonymous phone call, and the hustling, pushing, shoving; the land of smash and grab and anything to win" as "Nixonland."

Fifties liberalism, however, gave way to New Left radicalism which built on the analyses of C. Wright Mills to identify a "power elite" of corporate, political and military interests. Chief amongst the culprits was "corporate liberalism" which was intrinsically entangled with American capitalism. Greenberg demonstrates how much of the New Left "paranoia," as he calls it, had a far-reaching impact on the development of conspiracy theories and the growing fear of Government surveillance. Watergate, however, only served to confirm what many New Leftists had long suspected about the intrusion of the state into the lives of its citizens. Greenberg lists the books and films which exhibited concerns about the menacing power of the state. Novelists such as Don DeLillo, Joseph Heller, Norman Mailer, and Kurt Vonnegut describe heroes who discover themselves to be unwitting pawns in another's game. In the movie *The Parallax View* (1974) and *Missing* (1982), images of Nixon appear as tokens of dishonesty and as symbols of the sabotage of democracy.

Conspiracy theories often encompass the presidencies of both Kennedy and Nixon. The former is typically the victim of a plot in which Nixon had some role,

either as an instigator or an accomplice. These theories find their most obvious expression in Oliver Stone's 1995 movie *Nixon*. This film extended the contention developed in Stone's earlier movie, *JFK*, fitting Watergate and Nixon's career into a single, grand conspiratorial scheme. Of all post-Second World War U.S. Presidents, only Nixon stands alongside John F. Kennedy in terms of name recognition. Truman, Eisenhower, and Lyndon Johnson are all major names in the shaping of post-war America throughout the Cold War era, and yet few people would be expected to name their great achievements in office or the statements they expounded. Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter, both successively coming to power in the wake of Nixon's Presidency, left even less of a defining imprint of their time in office. Kennedy, for that brief moment in which he was President seems to have put down an everlasting impression of the young, dynamic and heroically liberal champion which the majority of people would still be able to remember. The brilliance of Greenberg's book is that he shows that Nixon has just as wide a recognition among people of all generations—but that there is no universally acknowledged view of Nixon.

Even among those who view Nixon with contempt, opinion varies between those who see him as a dark conspirator and those who view him as a tragic, almost bumbling figure out of his depth on so many issues. And yet of all post-war Presidents, Kennedy and Nixon share their place in the hall of fame because of the vast cultural industries that have been built around them. In the case of Kennedy, an endless supply of books and films offer different takes on the assassination; in the case of Nixon, the conspiracy is Watergate. Both figures often serve to show the broader context in which stories are taking place, with Kennedy in power during the early sixties in an era all together more innocent and full of hope; Nixon's presence, as Greenberg demonstrates, usually denotes a more cynical or depressing period. At the outset of his book, Greenberg makes the point that Nixon plays a key part in Ang Lee's 1997 movie, *The Ice Storm*, with references to Watergate and Nixon's administration throughout the film.

Greenberg does an admirable job in pulling together the wide range of films and books which are not only about Nixon, but also those which feature the most mi-

nor of references to the former President. The range is indeed wide. Apart from the obvious films *All the Presidents' Men* and *Nixon*, clearly about the subject matter, Greenberg has also managed to compile a comprehensive set of fairly random references completely tangential to the rest of the film. For example, the crime film *Best Seller*, starring James Woods and Brian Dennehy, begins with a robbery in 1972 where the criminals use a vehicle resembling a Nixon Presidential campaign van and wear Nixon masks. Greenberg firmly locates this within the popular image of the Nixon mask and its various uses, by protestors, and fictional and real criminals alike. The obvious irony, as Greenberg points out, is that the mask is of a man who appears to be wearing a mask already.

These cultural references are many and varied. In a very bizarre example, Greenberg recounts a scene from *Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country* (1991), set in the distant future. The Vulcan, Mr. Spock, tries to convince the human Captain Kirk, commander of the *Starship Enterprise*, to make peace with the Klingon Empire, long-time enemies of the Earth and its allies. However, Kirk has spent his career fighting the Klingons. "There is an old Vulcan proverb," Spock says, "Only Nixon could go to China."

As Greenberg points out, while Nixon's China initiative never eclipsed Watergate, it did contribute a concept to political analysis: that of politicians using their hard-line reputations to bring about major reversals in position and policy. "Nixon going to China" not only entered the vernacular as a phrase—it entered broader culture. This concept should not have been alien to political commentators. As President, Lyndon Johnson employed the very same tactics to put down some of the most far-reaching civil rights legislation on the statute book; but it was Nixon who was seen to fully embody this approach to politics—the hard-line Communist-baiting conservative who used his reputation to open up diplomatic relations with Mao's China. Greenberg has assembled a vast array of cultural references and historical material and constructed an excellent investigation into the changing perceptions and image of Richard Nixon. This book is not so much about what Nixon did, but more about what he meant to so many people.

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