

St. Petersburg Times March 17, 1991

ONE OF US: Richard Nixon and the American Dream

By Tom Wicker

Random House, \$24.95

"When a man has cast his longing eye on office," said Thomas Jefferson, "a rottenness begins in his conduct." Seldom has that putrifying unfolded so publicly as with Richard Milhous Nixon, our transparent yet enigmatic 37th President whose final years in office fester on even the blotched face of American politics like a carbuncle.

New York Times editor and frequent Nixon critic Tom Wicker, whom Kurt Vonnegut called "perhaps our most trusted newspaperman," presents a balanced, even compassionate, study of someone he confesses he could neither vote for nor like. Using Nixon as its vehicle, *One of Us* becomes a massive, riveting tour through post-World War II American history.

Before holding Nixon's career up to twist slowly before us, Wicker establishes premises that temper the sordidness that follows: that Nixon was a bitter lifelong loner because of a "cantankerous" father and saintly but remote mother and became "a man who was not much loved because he could not love."

At Whittier College, Nixon did not join the campus club The Franklins, men of privilege, but established The Orthogonians, "mostly men who were working their way through school." Wicker suggests that Nixon always detested glamorous "Franklins" in politics—Alger Hiss, John Kennedy, Nelson Rockefeller—for whom things came easily, thinking himself a common man struggling for what he got, "one of us," a political Gatsby grittily pursuing the American Dream.

Nixon built his career on the Cold War proposition that the U.S. had to defend the "free world" against Communist domination. Taking a slightly higher road than Joe McCarthy, Nixon became a "Commie scourge," just the bone Eisenhower needed to throw traditional Republicans as running-mate in 1952.

Weeks before the election, Nixon was charged with appropriating \$18,000 in campaign funds, an unfair charge argues Wicker. Hurt and angered that Eisenhower wouldn't defend him (Nixon prodded the general, "There comes a time in matters like these when you have to [do something unPresidential] or get off the pot"), Nixon made the maudlin televised "Checkers" speech showing him as one of us, a victim with kids and a dog, part of a hardworking silent majority. Forever afterwards, Pat Nixon hated politics. She hovers ghost-like over this book as a vague long-suffering presence.

As traveling "prat boy" to Eisenhower, Nixon gained foreign affairs experience criss-crossing the world. Eisenhower taught Nixon how to manipulate puppet

governments into power in Iran in 1953, Guatemala in 1954. When McCarthy charged the White House with harboring Communists and demanded files, Eisenhower taught Nixon another lesson: a President can invoke "executive privilege" to thwart compliance.

Wicker contends Eisenhower never liked Nixon, considered dumping him from the 1956 ticket and wounded Nixon's 1960 campaign by answering a reporter's request for an example of a valuable Nixon idea: "If you give me a week, I might think of one." That November, battling Camelot, Nixon lost the closest presidential election in history.

He began molding himself as an "apostle of traditional values [and] social stability." After the Republicans' 1964 reactionary Goldwater binge, now safely flanked by Rockefeller and Reagan, common man Nixon coasted the middle road like a bowling lane, avoiding the gutters of extreme left and right. Sole rival George Romney self-destructed by opening his mouth. Thus, with Spiro Agnew, a running mate so intellectually dim that even his own faint glow looked like a star, Richard Nixon entered the White House.

It proved the last refuge of a scoundrel. Nixon committed the cardinal sin of disgracing the Presidency and leaving the office weaker than he found it.

Still, Wicker details several achievements. Although he believed blacks genetically inferior, Nixon, unlike Eisenhower, had applauded the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. Under Nixon, more Southern schools were desegregated than under any other administration. He reached an arms treaty with the Soviets and, crucially, opened relations with China. While he had no "secret plan" to end the Vietnam War beyond getting out before Hanoi won, our troops came home during Nixon's reign.

"Fatally subject to the allure of power," however, Nixon began the series of despotic actions which destroyed him. With the equally power-lustful Henry Kissinger, Nixon initiated "criminally concealed" bombing in Cambodia. When that story leaked in May, 1969, Nixon ordered secret wiretapping. What Senator Sam Ervin called a "Gestapo mentality" grew mortal when the 1971 *Pentagon Papers* prompted Nixon to create a team to stop all leaks. Soon "plumbers" Gordon Liddy and Howard Hunt, certain of Nixon's implicit approval, began the array of crimes now blanketed with the name Watergate, and an administration that believed itself above Congress, Cabinet, press and Constitution crumbled.

Throughout, Wicker offers absorbing glimpses of power: a callous Reagan, an insecure Johnson, a redeemed Ehrlichman, an Eisenhower whose clay feet reach mid-thigh. Nixon emerges stronger domestically than expected, weaker on foreign policy: arming Iran, betraying Iraqi Kurds, alienating India, paving the way for Chilean dictator Pinochet and Cambodia's Khmer Rouge, backing a cruel junta in Greece and allowing thousands of Africans to starve. If Kennedy represented our dream of ourselves, Wicker's Nixon embodies the commonplace reality of what we were, what we got when we choose "one of us."

