

Commentary

Richard M. Nixon: The Psychic, Political, and Moral Uses of Sport

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He had been, Richard Nixon constantly reminded Americans, a scrub football player in the honorable tradition of collegiate sport. When he accepted for a second time his party's presidential nomination, he gave thanks in the same breath for the influence of his mother, father, and football coach. In the White House, he brought to the governance of two hundred million Americans the language of the gridiron—macro-economic management by “game plan.” His underlings became notorious for playing “hardball,” and the patois of the diamond informed his own judgment that Nikita Khrushchev was a wily old hurler with good stuff and a wicked spitter; his Secretary of the Treasury, John Connally, a rawboned kid from the Texas League who could hit the long ball. Among his heroes he numbered Woody Hayes, and among his supporters he valued George Allen. As buses idled together in a tight ring surrounding the executive mansion to protect him from the presence of several hundred thousand Vietnam war protesters, he announced that he would spend the afternoon watching a college football game. And when such cool contempt ultimately failed him and he was driven from office in the denouncement of the Watergate morality play, Richard Nixon announced his decision to resign and proclaimed final satisfaction in having been “the man in the arena,” one who had played hard, fought well, sweated and bled, while others had remained mere spectators in the game of life.¹

To be sure, the connections between Nixon and sport have been many, diverse, and complex. In contrast, the popular interpretations of these connections have been too simple, or, more precisely, too pat. Such analyses are of two kinds. The first is defined primarily by the application, sometimes with subtlety but more often with an unbecoming fervor, of psychoanalytical insights and concepts. For the most part, the psychobiographical approach has focused on Nixon's active athletic involvement. On this personal level, it

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1. The 1968 acceptance speech is quoted in Richard Nixon, *RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (New York, 1978), 315. The characterizations of Khrushchev and Connally are from Richard Nixon, *Six Crises* (New York, 1963), 236; and William Satire, *Before the Fall* (Garden City, N.Y., 1975), 507. Nixon's resignation announcement is found in U.S., President, *Public Papers of the Presidents, Richard Nixon, 1974* (Washington, 1975), 629. The “man in the arena” quotation from Theodore Roosevelt was one of Nixon's favorites; see Raymond Price, *With Nixon* (New York, 1977), 346.

must be made clear at the outset that Nixon has never evidenced notable physical prowess or athletic grace; on the contrary, he has always been something of a klutz. His football teammates at Whittier College observed that he had two left feet and, as with all athletes, time took its inevitable toil. White House chief of staff H. R. Haldeman later commented, "Nixon was the least dextrous man I have ever known: clumsy would be too elegant a word to describe his mechanical aptitude."² But the young, lightweight (160 pounds in college) Nixon doggedly attempted for four years to play the tackle position for his alma mater. In practices, he served as the proverbial tackling dummy. He saw little real action, getting into but a few games and then only when the score was lopsided and the outcome already determined. His appearances on the held occasioned those outbursts of cheering reserved for the halt and the lame who have been adopted by fans in unconscious acts of humanity.

The absorption of daily beatings in a "lost cause"—Nixon never did win a varsity letter—has caused some to see here the tangled roots of psychological pathology. What could account for such behavior? In the eyes of several psychobiographers, only a neurotic need to prove one's health and virility after the death of two brothers from tuberculosis, or an all-encompassing but largely unspecified anal compulsion, or "a masochistic streak, which always seeks its counter-balance in sadism."³

One is sorely tempted to agree. How appropriate for the man Haldeman in a comment of candor described as "the weirdest . . . ever to live in the White House."⁴ But it is also possible to reverse the *ad hominem*. Such interpretations, it might be argued, are the work of a small band of intellectuals who have only spectated, who see sport merely as the story of stars and goats, who lack any appreciation of the camaraderie of the practice field or the sheer exuberance of play, anywhere or anytime. More importantly, psychoanalytic explanations fail to capture the constancy of what Stewart Alsop called Nixon's "obsession" with sport.⁵ The preoccupation continued long after the schoolboy footballer had become the sedentary lawyer and politician.

Nixon's public career has generated a second explanation of his involvement with sport, one perhaps best labeled the "crass-artifice" interpretation. In short, it holds that "the Trickster's" supposed interest in sport was as artificial as it was self-serving. Using Wilt Chamberlain to coax black voters into the Republican column was no more meaningful or authentic than allowing Sammy Davis, Jr., to embrace the presidential candidate in the pursuit of electoral victory. When Mark Harris, on assignment for *Life* during the 1962 California gubernatorial campaign, heard Nixon tell an audience of sportsmen, "If I have a greater interest than politics, it's sports," the writer noted

2. H. R. Haldeman, *The Ends of Power* (New York, 1978), 207.

3. The sadism quote is from David Abrahamson, *Nixon Vs. Nixon: An Emotional Tragedy* (New York, 1978), 80. The themes mentioned can be found in Michael Paul Rogin and John Lottier, "The Inner History of Richard Milhous Nixon," *Transaction*, November-December, 1971, pp. 19-28; Fawn Brodie, *Richard Nixon: The Shaping of His Character* (New York, 1981); Bruce Mazlish, *In Search of Nixon: A Psychohistorical Inquiry* (New York, 1972); and Arthur Woodstone, *Inside Nixon's Head* (New York, 1976).

4. Haldeman, *The Ends of Power*, 65.

5. Stewart Alsop, "Nixon and the Square Majority," *The Atlantic*, February 1972, p. 42.

that it was “unbelievable, lacking all conviction.”⁶ Here one finds the other side of the psychoanalytic coin: in place of unconscious psychosis, omnipresent manipulation. Harris is simply wrong. To be sure, Nixon used sport and its celebrities for political purposes. But there is abundant evidence that his passionate interest in sport was genuine and life-long.

Neither of these theories does justice to the complexity and duration of the relationships Nixon forged with sport over the years. Rather, it is more useful to adopt the clever metaphor of William Safire, Nixon’s former speechwriter, who in a substantially different context has suggested that the former president be viewed as a cake—layer, not fruit, one must add—a complicated individual whose personality and motivation ran several levels deep.⁷ Similarly, Nixon’s relationship with sport was multidimensional. Sport meant several different things to Richard Nixon throughout his life, and it connected to his character and career on levels both conscious and unconscious. Though each linkage can be examined individually, all operated simultaneously in that puzzling, endearing fashion that makes people more than the sum of their parts.

To understand the first of these linkages requires taking Richard Nixon seriously and at his word: he was indeed a “fan.” If his active participation in sport ended after college, except for occasional swimming, bowling, and golf, he was in this regard not unusual in pre-Nautilus-jogging-fitness-boom America. The passionate interest remained. Herb Klein recalls that he was given the title of Director of Communications in Nixon’s first administration because everyone in the room discussing the nature of the new post, including quite noticeably the president-elect, was in a great hurry to leave so as not to miss the USC-UCLA football game scheduled to be televised in ten minutes. With the play-by-play of the Army-Navy game humming softly in the background and acting as a kind of countdown for the “real” game on the West Coast, Klein suggested the first job title that flashed into his mind, and was pleasantly surprised when Nixon agreed immediately and hurried out to see the kick-off with his family.

Nixon’s own reasons for his love of athletics ring true: sport offered relief from the burdens of study and work and also provided an outlet for what he himself described as a “highly competitive instinct.”⁸ The need for such an outlet can be inferred from the exaggerated intensity of the young Nixon’s competitive zeal. Even as a benchwarmer he would become so overwrought before Whittier’s football games that he could not eat. A teammate recalled that everyone loved to sit next to Nixon at the traditional pre-game meal; he would be too excited to eat and one could, with smooth moves and good timing, easily capture a second steak. Once in the game, another friend recalled. Nixon, too excited to control his enthusiasm, would repeatedly be called off-

6. Mark Harris, *Mark the Glove Boy, or the Last Days of Richard Nixon* (New York, 1964), 84.

7. Safire, *Before the Fall*, 97-99.

8. Herbert Klein, *Making It Perfectly Clear* (Garden City, N.Y., 1980), 41-42.

9. Nixon, *Memoirs*, 19.

side. Later, a law-school chum remembered, he would in similar bursts of enthusiasm cheer himself hoarse and sometimes voiceless at Duke University football games.¹⁰

On one level, then, Richard Nixon emerges as a thoroughly familiar figure: the excitable young player grown to be the enthusiastic fan, for whom sport was an interesting diversion and a useful emotional outlet. There is undoubtedly a psychological dimension to this level, but a pattern shared by so many Americans is hardly an aberration and hopefully something less than pathological. If such be grist for the psychobiographer's mill, who among us is safe—or sane?

The second level of linkage involves a connection with sport less self-evident than that connoted by the label “fan”: Nixon self-consciously used sport to prove his folksiness, to establish his personal authenticity. Regular beatings on the football practice field could not make Dick Nixon a mensch, but they did give to the rather stiff, one-dimensional debating champion and A student the cachet of “regular guy.” The effect, he quickly learned, could be manipulated, and at Whittier he used sport as a common denominator to revolutionize the Quaker campus' social and political life. Faced with the dominance of a minority of affluent, well-dressed, somewhat snobbish students who ran the campus under the auspices of a social club called the Franklins, Nixon organized those on, or close to, the football team into a new fraternity, the Orthogonians. “They were the haves and we were the have-nots,” Nixon subsequently recalled.¹¹ Sport provided the rallying focus for the common man, a lesson well learned at the beginning of a long political career.

Nixon repeated the appeal later for higher stakes. A publicity flyer used in his first Congressional campaign in 1946 related to prospective voters the candidate's G.I. Joe credentials, added that he had worked in a fruit packing house and as a gas station attendant, and capped the claim to commonality with an appeal to the broadest common denominator: “He played college football (‘not too successfully,’ he says); maintains an intensive interest in sports.”¹² The self-deprecating tone became a hallmark. Nixon had been, he loved to repeat, “not heavy enough to play the line, not fast enough to play halfback, and not smart enough to be a quarterback.”¹³ One finds in such statements the sense of hurt and grievance that caused one psychobiographer to conclude that Nixon “never stopped thinking of himself as a failure.”¹⁴ But it is just as true that Nixon, a political animal with a perpetual need to demonstrate his “regular fellow” authenticity, simply realized that there are more scrubs in the world than stars, people who in one way or another serve in life as he himself had served on the practice field at Whittier,

10. The best accounts of Nixon's active football career are *ibid.*, 19-20; Brodie, *Nixon*, 110-12; Earl Mazo and Stephen Hess, *Nixon: A Political Portrait* (New York, 1968), 18-19; Ralph de Toledano, *One Man Alone: Richard Nixon* (New York, 1969), 24; and Henry Spalding, *The Nixon Nobody Knows* (Middle Village, N.Y., 1972), 86-93.

11. Quoted in Brodie, *Nixon*, 113.

12. The flyer is reproduced in *ibid.*, 265.

13. Quoted in James Keogh, *This Is Nixon* (New York, 1956), 26.

14. Woodstone, *Inside Nixon's Head*, 149.

taking their licks and ready to identify with someone who has done the same in a symbolic realm, sport, to which most can readily relate. “Being a loser,” Nixon subsequently observed, “tends to help after a time. It’s natural for Americans to root for the team that’s behind.”¹⁵

Sometimes Nixon’s manipulation went beyond the traditional legerdemain of electioneering. William Safire considered a blunder Nixon’s October, 1969, decision to symbolically dismiss several hundred thousand antiwar protestors by announcing that he would watch a college football game on television while they demonstrated on the Washington Mall. “But,” the Nixon staffer added, “it indicated the direction of his thinking. When he was making the final changes in his November 3 speech (his famous, stunningly successful appeal to the ‘silent majority’), he wanted to draw the battle lines between us and them—of the folks versus the elitists, of the ‘mute masses’ . . . against the noisy minority.”¹⁶ “Real Americans” would naturally understand the meaning of Nixon’s gesture; by appropriating sport, he would make his opponents all the more un-American. If sport could be used as a common denominator to bind together, it could also be invoked symbolically to divide.

Nixon recognized that, in the minds of many Americans in the late 1960’s, the world of sport affirmed the very values under attack by the emergent counter culture. Homer Babbidge, president of the University of Connecticut and a mildly critical observer of intercollegiate athletics, expressed the popular view in 1968: “Our team and our players, by and large, are the guys in the white hats—they keep their hair cut short, they’re clean, they’re orderly, aware of the importance of law and order and discipline.”¹⁷ And, he could easily have added, they strive for excellence and they play to win. Counter-culture critics, on the other hand, rejected “the whole concept of excellence and comparative merit.”¹⁸ As Will Hertzell, a University of Maryland basketball player, put it: “Athletics’ can be such a beautiful thing. It’s a shame to have to keep score. In fact, it’s a shame to have to keep score on anything in life.”¹⁹ To be sure, some critics claimed to be seeking only the purification of athletic endeavor, the divorce of sport from the perverting influence of monopoly capitalism rather than any evisceration of sport’s competitive essence.²⁰ But such subtlety was quite obviously lost on those who in these years were elevating a highly competitive, authoritarian figure like Vince Lombardi to the pantheon of American cultural heroes. President Nixon did not create this splintering of opinion, but his symbolic action in October, 1969, bespoke a keen appreciation of the depth of America’s cultural division and a desire to ally himself with those who perceived in sport the triumph of the traditional values of competition, discipline, and authority.

15. Quoted in *Look*, March 5, 1968.

16. Satire, *Before the Fall*, 172.

17. Babbidge’s address is reprinted in Jack Scott, *The Athletic Revolution* (New York, 1971), 23-34. The quoted material appears on p. 29.

18. Charles Reich, *The Greening of America* (New York, 1970), 167.

19. Quoted in Scott, *Athletic Revolution*, 67.

20. See, for example, Paul Hoch, *Rip Off the Big Game: The Exploitation of Sports by the Power Elite* (Garden City, N.Y., 1972).

It is nonetheless important to remember that there was something genuine as well as manipulative in Nixon's vision of sport as a common denominator. Several days after the Cambodian incursion of 1970 touched off campus rebellions across the nation, the President awoke in the middle of the night and made an unplanned visit to war protesters who were gathering at the Lincoln Memorial for the next day's massive demonstration. The strange trip proved to be a public relations fiasco. One student told reporters, "Most of what he was saying was absurd. Here we had come from a university [Syracuse] that's completely uptight—on strike—and when we told him where we were from, he talked about the football team." It was, Vanderbilt University Chancellor Alexander Heard commented, like "telling a joke at a funeral." But it was also an honest effort by an overwrought, beleaguered president to go beyond the language of politics and policies, beyond what he called the students' "miserable intellectual wasteland," to the level of real life, shared experience, and bedrock values, to the language of sport, football small-talk, the parlance of Middle America.²¹

It is easy to look at the Lincoln Memorial episode and see in the singular inappropriateness of Nixon's remarks only incredible insensitivity. But to do so cheats us of an appreciation of the symbolic quality of the incident. To "talk football" to war protestors was to invoke what they intuitively had come to recognize in Nixon's fascination with the sport: the game was for him, in addition to a fan's outlet and diversion and a political device, also a moral metaphor for a world-view that many youthful radicals found repugnant.

On this third level, sport as moral metaphor, we encounter Nixon's most complex connection with athletics. George Allen, head coach of professional football's Washington Redskins, observed acutely, "The President looks at football as a way of life."²² It is difficult, perhaps impossible, to know whether sport formed Richard Nixon's values, or reinforced them, or articulated them, or reflected them; most probably it did all of these. The process began early. From his father, rather than Vince Lombardi, he learned that winning was not the most important thing but rather the only thing.²³ And the lessons continued under Whittier coach Chief Wallace Newman (an Indian who had been an All-American at the University of Southern California), a man, Nixon recalled, "who was a fine coach but an even more talented molder of character." "I think that I admired him more and learned more from him than from any man I have ever known aside from my father."²⁴

Newman taught his players two fundamental lessons: the importance of striving and the importance of winning. Concerning the former, Nixon wrote,

21. The Lincoln Memorial episode is recounted in Safire, *Before the Fall*, 202-12; Nixon, *Memoirs*, 458-66; and Price, *With Nixon*, 168-74.

22. Quoted in Spalding, *Nixon Nobody Knows*, 92.

23. Brodie, *Nixon*, 45-46.

24. Richard Nixon, *Six Crises*, 402; Nixon, *Memoirs*, 19. See also Nixon's remarks to the National Football Foundation Dinner, December 9, 1968, in U.S. President, *Public Papers of the Presidents, Richard Nixon, 1969* (Washington, 1971), 1014.

“He inspired in us the idea that if we worked hard enough and played hard enough, we could beat anybody.”²⁵ The competitive spirit became for Nixon synonymous with the work ethic. As Garry Wills has argued so perceptively, he was the epitome of a vanishing breed: the classical liberal, the marketplace man whose essence, identity, and worth derive from striving, from self-discipline, from self-improvement. The emphasis, in Wills’s words, was “not on having risen but on rising.”²⁶ Small wonder, then, that Nixon’s wife would be someone who herself symbolized to him the frontier woman of hard work and disciplined manner, and that his best friend, Bebe Rebozo, would represent an updating of the Horatio Alger myth. What better place to see such values prevail than in sport, where score is kept with the utmost care—hits, runs, yards-gained, and pass-completions all totaled—and where the purity of the exercise leaves no bureaucratic nook in which the slacker can hide. Of course, there would be some to whom victory came too easily. These would be scorned. When quarterback “Broadway Joe” Namath tearfully, temporarily left the New York Jets in 1970, the President’s remark to Safire was vehement: “Good riddance!”²⁷ The star’s exotic life-style mocked virtually every aspect of the puritanical approach to sport, and one suspects that it was for cultural offenses rather than political proclivities that Namath later found himself on the infamous White House enemies list.

Newman’s second lesson was the importance of winning. “He had,” Nixon commented, “no tolerance of the view that how you play the game counts more than whether you win or lose. . . . He used to say, ‘Show me a good loser, and I’ll show you a loser’. . . . There is no way I can adequately describe Chief Newman’s influence on me.”²⁸

The Chief’s simple verities came under assault later in Nixon’s life as the defeats of politics began to exact a toll. At times, the bloodied campaigner could speak philosophically about losing, sensing in the fires of defeat a tempering of character perhaps more significant than the exaltation of victory. Visiting China, the President told Chou En-lai that he “had learned more from defeats than from victories” and that all he really wanted was a life in which he had “just one more victory than defeat.”²⁹

The lesson was learned too late, however, to really take hold in Nixon’s psyche. It is doubtful that sport à la Chief Newman imposed upon young Nixon his adversarial view of the world, but the lessons of Whittier football continued to be dredged up to rationalize a them-versus-us mentality. The maxims of early life—winning is the only thing—would always overshadow the hard wisdom of Nixon’s later years.

It is on this third of our levels that the interconnection between Nixon and sport came a cropper. As a metaphor for life, sport failed Richard Nixon. Or, more precisely, he failed sport. In thought, word, and deed, Nixon reduced

25. Nixon, *Memoirs*, 19.

26. Garry Wills, *Nixon Agonistes: The Crisis of the Self-made Man* (Boston, 1970), 162.

27. Quoted in Safire, *Before the Fall*, 552.

28. Nixon, *Memoirs*, 19-20.

29. *Ibid.*, 573.

the infinitely rich and subtle moral underpinnings of athletic competition to a caricature, all the while symbolically invoking sport to justify his distortion of its values. Somehow the lessons of the gridiron became confused with the law of the jungle. Speechwriter Raymond Price tried to warn as Watergate came crashing in on the administration, "Part of the trouble, I think, stems from our habit of regarding everything in competitive terms of winning and losing, of friends and enemies, of with-us-or-against-us."³⁰

To value striving and winning is not ignoble. But a moral cosmography built around striving and winning is supportable only in the context of the other, often less obvious values which surround these in the world of sport: the perception of limits imposed by considerations of sportsmanship; the sense of common pursuit which flows from accepted standards of excellence; the regard for rules which recognizes not merely their presence but also, more significantly, their necessity; the celebration of ritual and continuity; and the recognition of the need for, and legitimacy of, joyous expression. Those who have sought to understand Richard Nixon's connection with sport have emphasized the lessons he learned from his involvement as player and fan. Perhaps the more significant story lies in an understanding of the lessons he missed.

30. Price, *With Nixon*, 85.