



Defrosting Nixon

by Jonathan Aitken

RICHARD NIXON IS HAVING yet another comeback. As his biographer I always thought he would find a way of running again for some extraterrestrial office. Instead, his latest resurrection has been caused by Hollywood, or, to be precise, by Frank Langella, who stars as the 37th president in *Frost/Nixon*, the movie that is winning rave reviews and big box office takings on both sides of the Atlantic.

I am one of the few people who in different eras came to know both Langella and Nixon well. The great actor (I am referring to the former, although the latter was not without some thespian talent!) is an old friend of my wife, Elizabeth. She was formerly married to Rex Harrison and Richard Harris. This gives me a hard act to follow as a husband, but on the other hand I sometimes get to meet movie stars who would otherwise be above my pay grade. So when *Frost/Nixon* started its journey in the equivalent of an off-Broadway theatre in London, I saw a fair amount of Langella during rehearsals over agreeable lunches and dinners. Although mildly surprised that such a big star should be appearing at such a small London theatre, I was much impressed by the intensity of Langella's preparations. He had totally immersed himself in Richard Nixon. By watching every known video clip, by reading political histories and biographies, and by talking to anyone he could find who had known the former president, Langella somehow managed to capture his subject's Shakespearean complexities with uncanny authenticity.

In the movie Nixon's mean streaks, the inability to trust, the defensive circumlocutions, and the self-serving evasiveness are brilliantly recreated on screen. But so too are Nixon's bottled-up vulnerabilities, the pathos, the hurt, the self-deprecating humor, and even the dignity of a wounded lion in winter in this surprisingly sympathetic portrait.

Langella has explained that whenever he plays an important part he studies it from an unusual angle: "My belief is, if you don't get the soul of a character you haven't got him," he says, "and that's my aim to find his soul, to find the deepest qualities in him so I can make them come alive in me."

Finding Richard Nixon's soul has always been a challenging quest. His relationships with everyone were complicated, including God. But he was not an unspiritual man, particularly in the early and late phases of his life.

Son of a devout mother known to her neighbors as "the Quaker saint," Nixon grew up knowing his Bible well, accepting its infallibility and literal truth until he was 19 years old. Then, when a senior at Whittier College, he had a crisis of searching, doubt, and eventual finding. This was almost a long dark night of the soul, and it resulted in an extraordinary personal testament consisting of 12 college essays with the generic heading "What Do I Believe?" The fourth essay in this series, dated November 29, 1933, was entitled "More About the Soul." Nixon wrote:

The soul is the culmination of the development of a being, the highest level to which that being can aspire....the soul is that part of us which enables us to understand God's works. It is the spiritual part of personality. It flows into beauty as soon as personality realizes its highest aims.

In his final essay of "What Do I Believe?" Nixon came to this conclusion:

I have as my ideal the life of Jesus. It shall be my purpose in life therefore to follow the religion of Jesus as well as I can. I feel I must apply his principles to whatever profession I find

myself attached. For to me this intellectual log has proved to be a gradual evolution towards an understanding of the religion of Jesus. My greatest desire is that I now apply this understanding to my life.

ONE CAN HEAR THE CYNICS LAUGHING. For like most of us Nixon had his stumbles and falls when it came to following the life of Jesus. So whatever happened to all that burning spirituality? The answer may be stranger than anything written in the essays. Having bared his soul in these college compositions, Nixon subsequently changed course and kept his spiritual beliefs obsessively private. Unlike most U.S. politicians, he developed an aversion to mentioning God or religion throughout his public career. But it would be a mistake to draw the conclusion from his silence that Nixon either lost his faith or massively downgraded its importance in his life.

He was a dutiful attendee of chapel at Duke; he was a Sunday school teacher in his 20s; he read his Bible daily during his war service in the South Pacific; after coming home he discussed the possibility of becoming a Quaker minister; before the Checkers broadcast in 1952 he sat with his head in his hands, saying, "O God, thy will be done, not mine"; on election day 1960 he went off alone to pray in a Catholic chapel; he developed spiritual friendships with Norman Vincent Peale and Billy Graham; he was the first president to hold Sunday services in the White House; he said silent prayers in the Lincoln



sitting room on the eve of major presidential journeys to Moscow and Beijing; he told Haldeman and Ehrlichman of his daily intercessions to God for guidance during Watergate; and he knelt to pray with Henry Kissinger on the eve of his resignation from the presidency. Toward the end of his life he shyly revealed to his daughter Tricia that he still knelt down every evening to say his prayers. In his final interview for my biography, he said he had at last found for himself the God-given Quaker ideal of "peace at the center."

"So what?" might retort the cynics. Perhaps they should go and watch Frank Langella's screen tour de force as Nixon. For there is surely a spiritual dimension of

repentance in those cathartic answers to Frost's gently probing questions. "Yes," said Nixon, "I let the American people down. And I'll have to carry the burden the rest of my life."

In some mysterious way, Langella's Nixon reveals more than the real Nixon when delivering that line. The intuitive actor brings to the surface what the repressed politician was so often hiding away. It is called the soul. Perhaps it was deeper, more sympathetic, and more spiritual than Richard Nixon ever liked to let on.

Jonathan Aitken, *The American Spectator's High Spirits columnist*, is most recently author of *John Newton: From Disgrace to Amazing Grace* (Crossway Books). His biographies include *Charles W. Colson: A Life Redeemed* (Doubleday) and *Nixon: A Life*, now available in a new paperback edition (Regnery).



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