

**New Nixon Stories and Reflections from the  
British Biographer of the 37th President**

By Jonathan Aitken



**13 September 2023**

**The Richard Nixon Library & Museum,**  
18001 Yorba Linda Blvd,  
Yorba Linda,  
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United States

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Almost 32 years ago, I put down my authors pen with an exhausted if exhilarated feeling of mission accomplished having just written the final sentence of my 760 page biography of President Nixon.

After four years of hard but enthralling work, the greatest endeavour of my life up to that moment was finished. Phew!

In literary circles there is a joke that goes:

*"Every great man has his disciples, but too often its Judas who writes the biography!"*

Well, I hope I was neither a betraying Judas biographer nor a preaching to the choir hagiographer.

I rather suspect that one of the reasons why Mr Nixon encouraged me to write his life was that until the 1990s Nixonian literature had oscillated between campaign biographies which were sugary and post-Watergate biographies which were spiteful or worse.

I remember the astonishment I felt on picking up a 1981 Nixon biography, *Richard Nixon: The Shaping of His Character*, written by Fawn M. Brodie, a Professor of History at UCLA no less and coming across this sentence in the opening chapter:

*"The way four-year-old Richard mashed the potatoes in his mother's kitchen was an early sign of his future psychopathic tendencies".*

Well, I could see there was a vacancy for a different kind of biographer! Perhaps it may have helped that I was a non-American writer.

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Because to this day there seem to be two historical sagas on which many American journalists and commentators still find great difficulty in being objective or even rational Vietnam and Watergate.

Now I was a war correspondent myself in Vietnam where I had a ringside seat during some of the worst years of that tragedy.

So I understand something about the military and political mistakes that were made there.

And having interviewed many of the participants in Watergate, including Mr Nixon, I am a harsh critic of the mistakes in that tragedy.

Nevertheless, I think that it helped me to write about these disasters from a geographical and political distance.

In any case the judgment of history is never final. So, thirty two years on perhaps I do have one or two fresh perspectives and some new Nixon stories to share with you tonight.

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Soon after I had handed in my manuscript to my publishers, I came to visit President Nixon at his home in New Jersey.

My purpose was to say goodbye to him for what I wrongly thought would be our last meeting and to thank him for his initially hesitant, but eventually generous, cooperation with me.

I described this encounter in the last ten pages of my book headed Epilogue.

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You may be amused by one humorous memory when, after offering me a glass of wine but denying one to himself, President Nixon told me that his doctor had just advised him to give up alcohol.

When he relayed this medical advice to his great friend and drinking buddy Bebe Rebozo, Bebe's instant reaction was:

*"Get a second opinion – at once!"*

Our conversation on that afternoon some 30 years ago ranged from the Political to the biographical, to the personal and finally to the spiritual an area which like many areas of Mr Nixon's life was one of considerable complexity.

So I asked him, as he was approaching the age of 80, and was enjoying a considerable rehabilitation in his reputation, if longevity had brought him serenity?

Had it perhaps even brought him to the state of grace known to Quakers as *"Peace at the Center"*?

After a long pause President Nixon replied:

*"Yes, I think that my Quaker fatalism did help me to weather the storms of the past, so yes, I do feel that 'Peace at the Center' has come to me".*

In reflective moments I have sometimes asked myself if this was true and if so what were the ingredients in the "Peace at the Center" mountaintop reached in old age by Richard Nixon.

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So I'd like to make an attempt in tonight's lecture to suggest some of the reasons historical, political and personal as to why his arrival on this mountaintop of peaceful serenity was justified, even if the climb itself had rarely been peaceful.

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It is generally agreed, even by Mr Nixon's detractors, that he was an outstandingly creative and innovative Foreign Policy President.

I do not need, in this audience, to list his international footprints on the sands of time such as:

- the opening to China;
- hardheaded detente with the Soviet Union;
- the ending of the war in Vietnam;
- saving Israel from annihilation in 1972;
- a reset of US relations with Europe and so on.
- Some moves in the Middle East which paved the way for Camp David Accords

To those high achievements in office should be added a remarkable list of public and private forecasts in his so-called retirement years when in his

- books,
- speeches,
- articles
- and private correspondence with President Reagan and President Clinton he time and again showed himself to be a statesmanlike, if not a prophetic sage of foreign policy.

Let me tell you an unknown story of the uncanny Nixonian talent or gift for international predictions.

In the fall of 1978, the former President made one of his not infrequent visits to London. He invariably stayed at Claridge's.

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Being a man of routine, he liked to go for a walk around lunchtime in nearby Hyde Park. I was one of his regular walkers.

So on October 16 1978 I collected him from Clarridges and as we walked across the Park I told him that I had just heard on the one o'clock news that in the Vatican, the conclave had unexpectedly elected an unknown Polish Cardinal named Karol Józef Wojtyła (pronounced Voy-TY-wah) as the new Pope.

President Nixon stopped dead in his tracks almost as if he had seen a vision or heard a voice. He said over and over again as if in a trance:

*"Polish Pope, Polish Pope, Polish Pope .....that could be the spark which will light the flame which will burn down the walls and iron curtain on Eastern Europe"*

I expressed polite amazement at this almost celestial prediction.

But the former President dismissed my doubts saying: *"No I can see it.....I know I am right"*.

And then reverting to earthly realpolitik he said: *"Jonathan at tonight's meeting could you plant a question on the new Pope?"*

Which I did – and of course he answered it superbly with his extraordinary prophecy which more or less turned out to be right. Like many a prophet of old, President Nixon was sometimes more honoured in countries other than his own. I recall one example of this in 1992, which in its aftermath also resulted in that rare jewel – an original and spontaneously amusing Nixon joke. The occasion was a spectacular banquet laid on by the Atlantic Richfield Oil Company.

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In its quest for exploration licences in the North Sea ARCO invited anyone who was anyone in the British Government or the oil industry to a memorable dinner for 800 guests in the ballroom of Claridge's Hotel.

One ingredient which made this evening so memorable was that the after-dinner speeches were delivered by not one but two former Presidents of the United States.

President Reagan, who unusually was playing second fiddle on this occasion, confined himself to giving an introduction of President Nixon. Reagan was at his most winsome, anecdotal, and charming.

*He began "Ladies and Gentleman as Henry VIII said to each of his six wives – I won't be keeping you long".*

In that spirit President Reagan poured gracious compliments over his hosts, the British political establishment he was addressing and his fellow Presidential co-speaker hitting every right note perfectly – and he completed the whole introduction in no more than five minutes.

The only slight oddity, which was something to do with the hotels lack of technology, was that for this impeccably brief introduction President Reagan needed six or seven giant cue cards.

They were huge placards held up by waiters close to the podium. So what?

Every President has their own little ways to get their message across.

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However, President Nixon, by contrast, held the audience spellbound for the next 45 minutes as he went on a magisterial tour d'horizon around the world:

- East West Relations,
- the latest developments in China,
- Inside Stories from the Kremlin,
- the rising importance of the oil rich states in the Middle East,
- the coming threats of international terrorism.

You name it President Nixon's speech had it and all without a note.

So he sat down to a well deserved and thunderous standing ovation. The next morning, as his British Biographer, I had breakfast with President Nixon.

He asked me, as I knew he would, for my insights into the audience's reactions to his speech. I had many favourable such reactions to report.

One of the common reactions was the universal amazement that the Nixon 45-minute multi-faceted speech had been delivered without so much as a glance at a note whereas the Reagan 5 minute introduction had required all those cue cards. Nixon enjoyed this.

So much so that he beckoned to his table, various VIP breakfasters who had also been invited to the event by the Atlantic Richfield Oil Company. I recall that they included Henry Kissinger and George Shultz.

Mr Nixon would say: *"Jonathan Aitken, who is Deputy Defence Secretary, has some interesting insights into last night's speeches"*.

So I duly delivered my insights including the one about the cue cards.



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After breakfast President Nixon walked with me to the great marble floored entrance hall of Claridge's.

Our arrival there coincided with President Reagan's imminent departure from the hotel. He told us that he was on his way to speak to the Oxford Union.

So we all chatted for a moment or two until President Reagan, surrounded by an entourage of Secret Service men, aides, escorts and so on left for his car.

But no more than a few seconds later down the great staircase of the hotel came a rather different entourage of porters, heavy lifters and hotel staff and so on, who between them were carrying down the staircase, a number of large square rectangles wrapped up in packaging material.

At a guess they were probably someone's art collection of large paintings.

President Nixon looked up at this procession of porters and their packages.

A wolfish smile crept over his face:

*"Oh Gee!"* he said.

*"I guess those must be Reagan's cue cards for Oxford!"*

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As we are here in Yorba Linda, let me go further back in time and offer one or two insights on the early years of Richard Milhous Nixon.

I believe I was the first Nixon biographer to come here a quarter of a century ago with introductions to several of Mr Nixon's school contemporaries, teachers, family friends and neighbours.

Most of them were in their 80's or even 90's but they had never talked to any sort of writer before.

With a schedule organised for me by old Nixon stalwarts well known to some of you such as Loie Gaunt and Hubert Perry, I reaped a rich harvest from those interviews here in Yorba Linda and at Whittier.

I think my interviewees were amazed to be told that the great man himself was suddenly encouraging them to talk to this exotic newcomer to South California – a British MP and Presidential biographer.

Why was Mr Nixon so helpful? Well obviously partly because I was building a relationship with him which gradually grew from diminishing mistrust to growing trust. But he also became increasingly cooperative because of what I will call "The Stephen Ambrose" factor.

Stephen Ambrose in the 1980s was a respected historian and biographer of President Eisenhower who in 1987 had published the first volume of what was to be a three-volume biography of President Nixon. President Nixon did not like Professor Ambrose or his book.

Politically he always referred to Ambrose as "that flag burner" because Ambrose had been a Vietnam protestor in the era of flag burning.

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As a writer he referred to Ambrose as *"just a scissors and paste guy who just recycles other journalists' mistakes"*.

Not an entirely fair comment in my opinion but Nixon was offended by the errors and omissions in the early life chapters in Volume I of Ambrose.

And this was one reason why many more doors were opened to me by the 37<sup>th</sup> President as I started my biographer's journey.

If I am allowed to give myself one pat on the back as a Presidential biographer, it would be that the first six chapters of my book, dealing with the story up until the young Nixon starts to run for Congress, that have not yet been improved upon by any other author.

One strange and not entirely welcome voice agreeing with that view came from Oliver Stone who told me that he relied heavily on my book for parts of his biopic, "Nixon" because it contained the most authentic material on the early years and family background.

As I deplored much of the hate-filled fantasy nonsense of the Stone movie, I saw this as a decidedly back-handed compliment. But if even the ranks of Tuscany could cheer my first six chapters perhaps, I did get somewhere.

The greatest coup of the early life chapters which owed nothing to cooperation from the Nixon camp was due to sheer biographer's good luck.

I succeeded in interviewing a lady well known to have been the former President's steady girlfriend in his college days at Whittier. Her name was Ola Florence Welch the attractive daughter of the Whittier Police Chief.

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Needless to say I got no help from Mr Nixon in tracking her down but by luck another Whittier student from the 1930's whom I interviewed, knew she was living in rural Arizona and had her number.

So I called her, and she gaily responded:

*"For most of my life I've been expecting to get a call from some reporter wanting to ask me questions about Dick, but you are the first one.*

*Why don't you come on over?"*

So, I flew to Arizona and stayed the night with 80-year old Ola Florence Welch and her husband Gail Jobe who had been in the Whittier football team with the young Dick Nixon.

Both of them were full of interesting memories of their celebrated contemporary so we had a great dinner.

Early in the morning Gail Jobe had to leave to work in a nearby gas station.

I was left alone with Ola Florence.

Suddenly over breakfast she said rather coyly: *"I've got all Dicks love letters to me here in this biscuit tin. Would you like to see them?"*

Well, you bet I would! So for the next two hours or more I poured over most of the contents of that biscuit tin.

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The letters were fascinating. I took as many handwritten notes as I could in the time available and quotes from some of those letters appear in my book.

The story that emerged was that as teenagers Ola Florence Welch and Richard Nixon had been deeply, if turbulently, in love. So much so that on the night of June 10 1933 they promised to marry each other.

They took this mutual promise seriously and he began saving up to buy a wedding ring. He gave his spare dimes, quarters and dollars to Ola Florence to put into a money box which she called "The Ring money box".

After three years at Whittier Dick won a scholarship which took him to study law at Duke University in North Carolina.

So love letters kept flowing, intense on his side, perhaps less so on hers. For while Dick was away, Ola Florence started to play with Gail Jobe, a handsome fellow student and star of the Whittier football team.

His father was a rancher, socially a notch or two above her fiancé's father, Frank Nixon, who was a grocer.

By the time Dick came back from Duke he found he had competition, and that he was losing in the race for Ola Florence's affections. Like Nixon the older politician, Nixon the young suitor did not give up. He fought back, he wrote shoals of emotionally charged letters complaining bitterly of Ola Florence's betrayal of their engagement.

But eventually he had to concede defeat when Ola Florence sent back the contents of the Ring money box. Dick then sent her one last heart-

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rending letter congratulating Mr and Mrs Gail Jobe on their forthcoming wedding.

Now you might well ask why I am spending time in this lecture highlighting a youthful love affair that went wrong, indeed so badly wrong that it was clear from the letters that Dick's heart was broken.

Well, there is a reason. If I had to highlight one or two fault lines which ran from his early years to his White House years they would be a deep rooted flaw of personal insecurity linked to an almost paranoid inability to trust.

His soaring grandeur of his intellectual and political gifts camouflaged mysterious moments of self-doubt and low self-esteem.

He was a character of Shakespearian complexity and this weakness most apparent when applied to the management of staff and colleagues may have sown the seeds from which sprouted Watergate.

Did that weakness start to form the scars of pain he bore in his early years come from losing two brothers to killer diseases and the desperate moves to Lung Clinics in Prescott Arizona?

Or were they from growing up in hardscrabble poverty and the unsuccessful grocery store run by his volatile father Frank.

Or was it the broken engagement with Ola Florence Welch?

These are deep and unknown waters which deserve further study.

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When I started my biographers journey one or two people warned me that Mr Nixon was a cold, calculating, manipulative man who would use me as cleverly as he had used so many others.

Not true so far as I was concerned. There is an old French proverb: "*No man is a hero to his valet*" to which some cynics have added "*Or to his biographer*".

But my respect for Mr Nixon increased during the four years I spent in researching and writing my biography.

Getting to know him was an utterly absorbing experience in which familiarity bred not contempt but a rising measure of affection and admiration. That elusive figure "The real Nixon" did emerge with the mellowing of age after the pain of resigning the Presidency.

President Nixon had an overprotective sense of privacy yet, at times, a rather vulnerable willingness to share intimacy. Let me tell you one story illustrating this.

On one of his last visits to Moscow in 1992 towards the end of his life he made a stopover in London.

He refused all advance offers from me of hospitality but then unexpectedly called up soon after his arrival and asked if I would like to go to the theatre with him.

He had noticed that *Carousel* by Rodgers and Hammerstein was playing at a West End Theatre. Had I ever seen it?

"No" I said.

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*"Oh, you'll love it" he said. "It is far and away my favourite musical".*

So we met at the theatre.

By that time, he had dispensed with his Secret Service protection so we queued up at the box office for tickets like any other tourists.

Because it was my first time at a performance of Carousel, Mr Nixon treated me as if I was a schoolkid who needed to have the plot and characters explained in detail as we went along. This was helpful and also very revealing.

The most interesting revelation came when Mr Nixon whispered to me that the leading young man in the musical, Billy Bigelow, was a dead ringer for his bother Harold.

As some of you know Harold Nixon, was the extrovert, uncomplicated, good looking, girl chasing, energetic eldest Nixon brother who apparently had many of the charismatic leadership qualities of the Billy Bigelow character in Carousel.

I recall, that even in the darkness of the theatre, Richard Nixon became quite emotional when whispering about Harold Nixon.

And that was because Harold had died in Yorba Linda at the age of 23 of TB, which in those days was a killer disease, much more feared than cancer is today. TB had also carried off the youngest brother, Arthur, eight years earlier.

Despite his pangs of memory for Harold, President Nixon loved that evening at the theatre.



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This was partly because he was a Carousel buff, word perfect, as he mimed along with every song, particularly "You'll Never Walk Alone" which was featured at Mrs Nixon's funeral service here in 1993.

And there was a second reason. For on this particular Saturday night at least a third of the seats in the theatre were filled with young USAF officers and officer cadets who had come over to London on weekend leave from their base in Frankfurt.

In the interval some of them spotted their former President sitting quietly in the stalls. So in no time he was happily autographing many of their programmes. And when the performance ended these young service men and women from the military formed a guard of honour outside the theatre and cheered their former President loudly.

He was on cloud nine, so much so that having announced that he would go straight from the theatre back to his hotel, he changed his mind.

So we wandered incognito and without a reservation into a nearby Greek restaurant, Beotys in St Martins Lane, where the assembled diners stood up and clapped him. That night he was certainly a warm man not in the least a cold man that night.

And I recall that he did tell me at one point that Carousel and Billy Bigelow brought him back to the cheerful optimism of working-class boys and girls enjoying life together in America of the 1920s and 30s.

The President Nixon I knew on that evening and many others was a good guest but also he was a great host.

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In 1979 I got married and with my bride we spent part of our honeymoon in the United States.

When he heard of this President Nixon invited us to have dinner and stay the night at La Casa Pacifica, the former western White House, overlooking the ocean at San Clemente. To our delight and amazement Mr and Mrs Nixon hosted us with memorable romantic, gastronomic and political touches.

Corsages of red roses, gourmet food and fine wines to die for and a guest list consisting of old Presidential family members President and Mrs Nixon, David and Julie Eisenhower, Congressman James and Mrs Mary Roosevelt (Mary how great to see you here tonight) and the honeymooning Mr & Mrs Aitken bringing up the rear. A night to remember!

Now some of you may be thinking that this lecture with its pastiche of personal memories is too superficial.

So let me head towards my conclusion by asking three rhetorical questions which may interest all students of the life and times of Richard Milhous Nixon. What made him so remarkable? How will history judge him? And a personal one to myself: Why did I find writing his biography such a fascinating and enjoyable mountaintop experience?

The first question: What made Richard Milhous Nixon so remarkable can be answered in many different ways. Here are three of them: My first answer is that throughout his life he had an almost super-human capacity for sheer hard work.

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When he was a schoolboy here in Yorba Linda his grandmother Almira Milhous made him learn by heart selected verses from Longfellow's *Psalm of Life*.

One of them read:

*"The heights by great men reached and kept were not attained by sudden flight,  
but they, while their companions slept, were toiling upward in the night".  
At every stage in his life he did a huge amount of "toiling upward in the night".*

He was a voracious reader. A hardworking professional politician to his fingertips. He was described, not inaccurately, by Lyndon Johnson as "a chronic campaigner".

Throughout his career, in Kipling's poetic language, he filled

*"the unforgiving minute  
With sixty seconds worth of distance run".*

Even in his post resignation years, many of them devoted to the unique activity of "Running for Ex-President", Mr Nixon's energies and workload were prodigious, as I saw at first hand.

So measured by Longfellow's call to keep "toiling upwards through the night", the 37<sup>th</sup> President well deserved his career success because of his industry. Secondly, I would express what I know to some will be a contested view, namely that Mr Nixon was a good picker of people.

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In the course of some 180 interviews I carried out for my book I met, often on more than one occasion, many of the key players in the Nixon story including:

- Henry Kissinger,
- Bob Haldeman,
- John Ehrlichman,
- Chuck Colson,
- Bob Finch,
- Al Haig,
- Ray Price
- Bill Rogers,
- George Shultz
- Len Garment
- Bill Safire
- Fred Malek
- Jim Cavanaugh
- Frank Gannon,
- Rose Mary Woods,
- Jack Brennan,
- John Taylor, now Bishop John Taylor, and his wife Kathy

They had their exits and their entrances. Some of them made mistakes.

But one thing they all had in common is that they passed the Machiavelli Test. What's that? It is contained in the opening line of one of the most historic political essays of all time – *The Prince* – by Niccolò Machiavelli in 1532.

That opening line says: "*When one comes to judge the quality of a ruler, one should first judge the quality of the brains of the men around him*".

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Warts and all, the quality of the men around Richard Nixon, chosen by him to play key roles before, during and after his Presidency, were remarkable men.

I know this is by no means a universally held view, but I am bold enough to stand by it.

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The third remarkable quality I would highlight is President Nixon's resilience. He once said to me:

*"Failure is not falling down. Failure is falling down and not getting up again to continue life's race".*

This was an axiom he lived by. His career was characterised, more than any 20th or 21st century political figure one can think of, by a rollercoaster ride of rises and falls, defeats and victories, crises and recoveries, failures and successes.

Even after the greatest imaginable failure of all -Resignation from the Presidency in disgrace – he somehow found the strength to make a come back to a considerable, indeed remarkable, measure of respect and reputational recovery.

If there was ever to be such a thing as a saint of political resilience, Richard Nixon would surely be the strongest of candidates for beatification to this imaginary post.

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My second question: How will history judge Richard Nixon is harder because the judges and the judgements of history keep moving.

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But here is my take on this. On the stock exchange of history, shares in President Nixon's reputation are a good buy. Brokers might call it a recovery situation.

The recovery has taken longer than Nixon admirers would have liked. Writing nearly a quarter of a century ago in the final paragraph of my book, I said this:

"My conclusion is that Richard Nixon, both as a man and as a statesman, has been excessively maligned for his faults and inadequately recognised for his virtues".

True then I think, but not entirely true yet. Those two demons: Watergate and Vietnam, continue to hover around President Nixon in death just as they tormented him in life.

Indeed, it can be said that during his Presidency, he was the last casualty of Vietnam and Watergate was the final battlefield on which he fell.

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You will all be relieved to hear that I have no intention of exhuming the corpses of Watergate and its cover up tonight.

After all the Watergate industry is surely dying as are its few surviving participants and as are the locust swarm of journalists and conspiracy theorists who have made Watergate their meal ticket for nearly half a century.

So we must by now be living in the post-Watergate era.

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This means that the pendulum of historical revisionism is already starting to swing away from President Nixon's negative flaws and failings and towards his positive achievements and strengths such as in his domestic policy. This included the establishment of the Environmental Protection Agency, the desegregation of Southern schools and the War on Cancer.

I predict that the swing will accelerate in the decades and even centuries in which the world will continue to be studying the story of the life and times of Richard Nixon.

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This brings me to the final rhetorical question which I pose to myself: Why did I find President Nixon's biography such a fascinating and enjoyable mountain top experience? My answer is simply that I believe that I caught glimpses of his greatness.

Many of those glimpses were to do with his foreign policy achievements in the geopolitical arena. I believe he had an extraordinary talent, almost a gift of second sight, for predicting the unseen future consequences and the invisible knock-on effects of great events.

Where did this gift come from? Did he acquire it during those eight Vice-Presidential years when he gained priceless diplomatic insights and knowledge while touring the world? Or did it come from the tutorials he received from President Eisenhower's great Secretary of State: John Foster Dulles?

Or did it come from his own meetings and his ability to read the motives and next moves of giants such as de Gaulle, Khrushchev, Brezhnev and Zhou Enlai? These are all valid suggestions.

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Yet deeper studies suggest that the First Term Congressman Nixon, who so fervently supported the Marshall Plan revival in post war Europe or the even younger Congressional Candidate Nixon addressing Rotary Clubs in Orange County on the need to stand up for the Soviet Union had right from the beginning second sight vision on world affairs which came from more powerful sources than diplomatic or political experience.

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Complex is an overused adjective to describe Richard Nixon. Perhaps there might be simpler explanations for both the good and not so good sides to his character.

At the risk of sounding mystical I would suggest that in his beginning was his end and in his end was his beginning.

What I mean by this is that the early years of young Nixon and the post resignation years of ex-President Nixon give us the strongest clues and the best keys to both his greatness and his weaknesses.

So I leave you with the thought that these periods of his life are worth deeper study by future generations.

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Perhaps no one will fully understand Richard Milhous Nixon.

But I hope I have said enough tonight to show how much I admired him, how faithfully I tried to understand and portray him and how proud I am to have been his British friend and biographer. Thank you for listening to me tonight.

And now for your questions!