

Lecture by Jonathan Aitken given at the Nixon Presidential Library  
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**A biographer's journey around President Richard M Nixon  
and Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher**

It is a great joy to be back in the Nixon Library, to see many old friends such as Ed Nixon, Jack Brennan and Frank Gannon and now to give this talk about President Nixon and Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher.

In the ever expanding Political Science Departments of the world's universities, it will probably not be too long before some Professor devises an examination question or a dissertation title requiring students to make a comparison between these two giants of 20<sup>th</sup> century history.

So here tonight Ladies and Gentlemen is the first ever attempt at the answer to the comparison question. It is offered by an author who had the privilege of knowing both President Nixon and Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and writing each of their biographies.

Thomas Carlyle once said that a biographer should be an artist upon oath.

I rather like that description for it endows what is essentially the craft of biography, telling a life as an historical story, with the creativity of artistic portraiture.

Tonight I do not want to give the impression that Mr Nixon and Lady Thatcher were anything other than singular and separate individuals who left their own utterly different footprints on the sands of time.

Nevertheless there are some intriguing similarities in their backgrounds, their upbringings, their career paths and their attitudes to the great issues of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

For example, Richard Nixon and Margaret Thatcher were both in their early years

Children of small shopkeepers who helped their parents serve behind the counter or deliver groceries from what you on this side of the Atlantic call a 'Mom and Pop' store which we call a 'Corner Shop'.

Both grew up poor – not hardscrabble poor but in an environment where money was often uncomfortably tight.

Both were steeped in religion – Quakerism for the Nixon family here in Yorba Linda and Methodism for the Thatchers. The young

Margaret was made to go to church five times every Sunday by her preacher father which even she thought was "too much of a good things".

Both had plenty of brains and an application to their studies which won them prizes and scholarships.

Both of them were taught by their grandmothers to learn and recite a famous verse from Longfellow's Psalm of Life

*The heights that great men reach and kept  
Were not attained by sudden flight  
While their companions slept  
Kept toiling upwards through the night.*

As a result of their nocturnal studies Richard Nixon won a scholarship to Duke and Margaret Thatcher won a place at Oxford at the unusually young age of 17.

Both were unhappy and lonely at university. Richard Nixon spent many extended hours in the University's Law Library on his own that he was called "the loner with the Iron Butt". Margaret Thatcher was an isolated figure at her college snubbed by her contemporaries who came from superior social backgrounds.

Both had practical minds which lived off ideas but neither were true intellectuals of the academic type which live for ideas.

Both were extremely ambitious.

Both were unlucky in love in early years.

At Oxford Margaret Thatcher fell heavily for an aristocratic young fellow student Lord Craigmyle. He took her home to meet his domineering mother Lady Craigmyle who was underwhelmed by her son dating a grocer's daughter studying to be a chemist.

With a snobbery worthy of Oscar Wilde's character Lady Bracknell - The Dowager Lady Craigmyle said to the young Margaret Roberts, "*In trade are you? And in science? We know nobody who is in either*".

The collapse of her Oxford romance deepened the insecurity of Margaret Thatcher. The same could probably be said of the collapse of Richard Nixon's romance with Ola Florence Welch, the daughter of The Wittier Police Chief.

One of the most unusual episodes of my biographer's journey around Richard Nixon was when I tracked down his first serious girlfriend, Ola Florence Welch – by this time in her 80s to a remote farmhouse in Arizona. All I knew about her at that time was that she had dated Richard Nixon for 6 years – an unusually long period for teenage romances. Suddenly and unexpectedly when Richard Nixon was away at Duke University Ola Florence had met and married a Wittier classmate Gail Jobe.

What I discovered in the course of my evening with Mr and Mrs Jobe is that Ola Florence had been engaged to Richard Nixon. They had even been saving together for a wedding ring. So when she changed her mind, the blow hit her fiancé hard.

After dinner with Mr and Mrs Jobe I was asked to stay the night. The following morning Gail Jobe went off early to his job at the local gas station. When Ola Florence gave me breakfast she suddenly said to me rather shyly, "I kept all Dick's letters. Would you like to see them?"

So a biscuit tin was produced and out tumbled at least a 150 letters in Richard Nixon's spindly handwriting. Pure biographer's gold!

For the next 3 hours I read avidly through these love letters which I found deeply touching. The most poignant of them came after their breakup. There was no doubt that the young Richard Nixon was deeply hurt, so much so that he kept writing to Ola Florence urging her to change her mind right up to the eve of her wedding to Gail Jobe.

But the young Nixon told no one in his family or his circle of acquaintances about this hurt which hit him hard and deep. This was a desperately sad moment in his life and he faced it entirely alone. This was a pattern to be repeated many times in other more public rejections and disappointments during his life.

I have often asked myself whether this early debacle in the romantic life of the young Richard Nixon could be the key to that deep seated inability to trust which proved so damaging to the political life of President Nixon?

However, I hardly dare ask the question here tonight because I can hear in my imagination a rumble of disapproval in the celestial clouds above from a familiar voice saying, "That's just psychobabble!" Well maybe it is.

So let me move to the firmer ground of what powered the respective rises in the careers of Margaret Thatcher and Richard Nixon – just leaving you with the thought that in both cases that their childhood and adolescent insecurities acted as a spur to their ambition.

One tangible force in their respective careers was an extraordinary ability to work hard – not least when it came to speech preparation.

An enthralling discovery in my biographer's journey was the full text of Richard Nixon's speech in 1946 to the Rotarians of Pomona with the title "Soviet Imperialism and its challenge to Western Democracy".

At that time Richard Nixon was a 33 year old contender for the Republic Nomination of the 12<sup>th</sup> Congressional District so he could hardly have been a greener politician or a more inexperienced student of foreign affairs.

I would guess that the Rotarians of Pomona must have been amazed that instead of the usual light fare offered by speakers at their lunch club gatherings they were treated to a deeply serious analysis of Russian history from Ivan the Terrible in the 14<sup>th</sup> century to Lenin, Trotsky and Stalin. Then Richard Nixon gave them a prophetic summary of the doctrine of containment by America which he said should: "gain time to permit the growth of our moral and democratic ideals".

He predicted that one day the Soviet Empire would disintegrate because countries like Poland, Romania, Czechoslovakia and the Baltic States would one day prefer democratic freedom to Soviet totalitarianism.

A pretty amazing prophecy for 1946! At the very least those Rotarians must have recognised that they had been listening to a deeply serious, hardworking *homme serieux*.

Meanwhile in the foothills of English politics in the 1950s people were saying rather the same sort of thing about Margaret Thatcher as she started to run for Parliament at the age of 25. She was regarded as:

Intense  
Humourless  
Didactic  
And with a voice that grated  
Yet she was deeply serious in her well prepared speeches on the menace of Socialism.

I am sure Margaret Thatcher and Richard Nixon made bad speeches in their time but they practically never gave slovenly speeches. They were always heavily prepared, if not over-prepared.

They were omnivorous readers with well stocked minds. They both loved a good quotation.

Both used their exceptional memories to memorise their speeches. It was almost a party trick for them.

Margaret Thatcher's Maiden Speech in the House of Commons introducing a Bill on local government reform was delivered almost entirely without notes. Her fellow Members of Parliament including my father were bowled over by the impression she made in this way.

Richard Nixon all his life made a deep impression on audiences by appearing to speak extempore as a result of his meticulous rehearsals. So their ability to commit their speeches to memory was an important factor in their rises to power.

After their early similarities at this point in my biographer's journey there is a fork in the road in their careers.

Early on in his career Richard Nixon specialised in Foreign Affairs. In the 1940s onwards he was an influential member of the Congressional Committee which came to Europe and produced the Marshall Plan. During his 8 years as Vice President when he travelled the world and met world leaders on a scale never before equalled by any American office holder, Richard Nixon built up a huge expertise in foreign policy.

Margaret Thatcher by contrast was astonishingly insular. She never left Britain until she went on a honeymoon to the Canary Islands with her well off husband, Denis Thatcher. As an MP she focused almost entirely on domestic affairs and only rarely travelled.

When she became a long odds contender for the leadership of the Conservative Party in 1974, her greatest weakness was thought to be her ignorance of foreign affairs.

On this topic I have a small humorous footnote in the annals of Margaret Thatcher. I was a young MP when she started in the 1974 as a 100:1 outsider in the race for the Tory leadership. When she suddenly crept up as a dark horse on the rails and was probably about where Mr Rubio is today in the Presidential horse race. I went off on a visit to Israel and attended a Jerusalem dinner party.

Many of the guests from Israeli politics started questioning me about Margaret Thatcher as a potential leader and Prime Minister. What did she think of the Sinai Accords? What did she think of the military situation in Sinai? What did she think of Resolution 242 which was all about Sinai?

Towards the end of the evening, probably after too many glasses of wine I could not stand it any longer. So I said to the guests, look guys Margaret Thatcher knows absolutely nothing about foreign policy or the Middle East. She knows nothing about the political situation on the

ground here. In fact she knows so little about these issues that she probably thinks Sinai is the plural of sinus!

Unfortunately, there was a reporter present who turned this feeble jest into newspaper headlines. I had to apologise later to Margaret Thatcher. But although my joke was weak it was perilously close to the truth. Margaret Thatcher was woefully ignorant of international affairs.

Up until now in this lecture I have been talking about Margaret Thatcher and Richard Nixon as if they were equals. But chronologically speaking they were no such things. It should be noted that by 1974 that Richard Nixon had been President for six years and had made his historic opening to China. He had achieved some *détente* with the Soviet Union and signed the SALT Treaty. He had saved Israel from destruction in the 1973 war. At the same time Margaret Thatcher was a complete *ingénue* in foreign affairs. Yet it is right to speak of them both as great historical figures for reasons I will now develop.

One Nixon Thatcher insight worth a brief mention:

For at least 3 years after Margaret Thatcher became Leader of the Opposition the prevailing view was that she would never be Prime Minister. However, it was never a view shared by Richard Nixon. I know this because I introduced them at a meeting in The Speaker's House, in The House of Commons in 1978. Jack Brennan will remember it because he was there.

The two leaders had about 15 minutes of one-on-one time together. Richard Nixon came away from the encounter saying, "she has got it – she is a remarkable leader – she will Prime Minister and perhaps a great one". This was a remarkably prescient as well as a remarkably unfashionable view.

This brings me to the subject of how Margaret Thatcher rose to the elite group of iconic world's States persons.

Unlike Richard Nixon who had become President by meticulous planning and slugging it out for decades in primaries, mid-term elections and three Presidential campaigns. Margaret Thatcher became Prime Minister almost by accident.

Her chance came because of her predecessor, Edward Heath unexpectedly lost three elections in a row. In a weak field of contenders, Margaret Thatcher obeyed the old US Marine Corp attack command, "Hey diddle diddle straight up the middle". After a bad spell as Leader of The Opposition she came to power as Prime Minister in an episode known to

British Politics as the Winter of Discontent which was an excess of strike and wage claims by organised Labour Unions.

She confronted them. She imposed discipline on their wage claims and on the out of control soaring of public expenditure in Britain generally. She fought inflation. This made her an unpopular Prime Minister.

Then her prospects were transformed by a small war which had a great impact – this was The Falklands War. At first it was not well supported by the Reagan administration particularly by Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick who was notably pro-Argentina. Even President Reagan could not understand why Britain should be making such a fuss about what he called, “a little bunch of ice-cold rocks down there”.

But Margaret Thatcher saw an important principle at stake which was that no Nation should go unpunished for seizing another’s sovereign territory. So she despatched a fleet. She saw off Al Haig and his compromise peace-making proposals. She saw off Jeane Kirkpatrick. She regained The Falkland Islands and won huge admiration in the UK and around the World.

One of her many admirers was Richard Nixon. He called on her soon after The Falklands. And this is what he said to her:

“The Soviets will listen to you before they listen to us, they see you as strong, they see you as a tough right winger which they always respect. They know you’ve got a lot of clout with our frankly inexperienced White House. With your credentials you can bring a new realism into East West relations”.

And finally Richard Nixon advised Margaret Thatcher to:  
“Find the Young Comers in the Kremlin?”

Prime Minister Thatcher took this Nixonian advice seriously. With the help of British Intelligence she identified the unknown Mikhail Gorbachev, then an obscure Politburo member in charge of Agriculture, as a future leader. On the pretext of agricultural fact finding she invited him to the UK and then to her official country residence, Chequers. She also invited Mrs Gorbachev which was an imaginative move.

As soon as Mikhail and Raisa Gorbachev entered the great hall at Chequers everyone present realised that they were dealing with an entirely different kind of Russian leader.

Margaret Thatcher decided to handle her guest forcefully. After pleasantries they sat down to lunch and the Prime Minister began, “Mr Gorbachev I want our relationship to get off to a good start. I want there

to be no misunderstandings between us. So I must tell you that I hate Communism. I hate it because it brings neither freedom or justice, nor prosperity to the people. But if you Russians must have it then you are entitled to it secure within your own borders”.

When I interviewed Mikhail Gorbachev for my biography on Margaret Thatcher he told me that he was astounded. He said that the atmosphere at lunch soon became, “pretty rowdy” as they clashed over issues such as Russian Jews not being able to emigrate from The Soviet Union. At one moment when things were getting pretty heated Raisa Gorbachev mouthed to him, “It’s over – let’s leave”. At another point Gorbachev turned his back on the Prime Minister during lunch and she immediately turned her chair backwards towards him. Gorbachev performed an amusing recreation of the scene for our interview with full dramatic imitations.

The two leaders kept talking and after lunch they had another 3 hours of hammer and tongs conversation in a private room. Both were really keen to engage and fearless in their clashes of debate.

After the lunch Margaret Thatcher famously said to the World’s press, “Mr Gorbachev is a man I can do business with”.

When he got back to Moscow Mikhail Gorbachev used exactly the same words telling his Politburo colleagues, “Mrs Thatcher is a leader we can do business with”.

The next important move was Margaret Thatcher’s persuasion of Ronald Reagan to engage seriously with Mikhail Gorbachev. This was not entirely easy. President Reagan had until recently been describing the Soviet Union as the Evil Empire. The hardliners in his administration were in the ascendant. But the President listened to the Prime Minister. The Secretary of State, George Schultz and others perceived that Margaret Thatcher’s major contribution to super power diplomacy was her successful effort to persuade the President of The United States to have a serious dialogue with Mikhail Gorbachev.

Margaret Thatcher was a most effective go-between Washington and Moscow. She made her own ground breaking visit to the Soviet capital.

“She clearly softened Gorbachev up”, said Ronald Reagan ahead of the Geneva and Reykjavík Summits which led to the IMF Treaty.

Of course, when the Soviet and American leaders started to talk face to face Margaret Thatcher became less important. Nevertheless she played a major part as a bridge builder and peace maker whose greatest international impact lay in her thawing of the Cold War.

One of the reasons why Margaret Thatcher got on so famously well with Mikhail Gorbachev was that she found him on account of his ebullient and energetic personality – an attractive man.

This was more generally a surprising angle on Margaret Thatcher's Foreign Policy. For it turned out that the foreign leaders she could do business with most effectively with men she found good looking or attractive. For example, on political grounds that she would get on well with the Socialist President of France, Francois Mitterrand. However on his first visit to Chequers, and subsequently their stewardship would be often difficult Anglo/French relationship was surprisingly warm.

At the end of that first visit to Chequers when Mitterrand's car was leaving and going down the driveway, the British Cabinet Secretary, Sir Robert Armstrong turned to the Prime Minister and said words to the effect of, "That went rather well – didn't it?" To which Margaret Thatcher replied, "Yes, he likes women – you know, he likes women".

By contrast Margaret Thatcher could not stand Mitterrand's predecessor the reptilian President Giscard or the corpulent Chancellor Kohl of Germany or even, as she saw him the austere, anaemic President Carter. The handsome former movie star Ronald Reagan was her hero. Foreign policy by personal chemistry? Well, there was more than a touch of it!

In China Margaret Thatcher did not have a sure touch. She found Deng Xiaoping inclement and cruel. Britain had to leave Hong Kong by the terms of its Treaty with China by 1997. But Margaret Thatcher tried every possible manoeuvre to avoid this. She even solemnly instructed her joint Chief of Staff to prepare plans to defend Hong Kong against the army of The People's Republic of China. She showed little of the originality, sensitivity and far sighted statesmanship that President Nixon displayed in 1972 in his opening to China. This brings me to what was undoubtedly President Nixon's greatest footprint on the sands of time – his China initiative.

It is still a little early here in the West to appreciate the magnitude of this achievement especially at a time when China is today quite assertive and causing teething troubles in the world economy.

But in today's China they really do know the greatness of the Nixonian achievement.

I was in Beijing only a few days ago. And as Ed Nixon and others in this room know, it is no small advantage to mention that in China you once had a close connection with the 37<sup>th</sup> President of the United States.

Time and again and particularly by the rising generation of young Chinese leaders in business, politics and the media I was asked about President Nixon in terms of admiration and fascination.

The reason for this interest – perhaps adulation is perhaps a not too strong a word – is all summed up in a proverb which was quoted to me. It is an old village proverb relating to a village well. The proverb goes:  
“Everytime you go to draw water from the well, always remember the man who dug it”.

Now that historical well, metaphorically dug by Richard Nixon in his 1972 opening to China has produced an abundance of world changing water. If you look at the flow of it, the direction of travel or if you like the big historic tidal pull of the water sourced from that well you have to say that it has been an overwhelmingly positive force for good.

Yes, I know there are little shoals and whirlpools and unhelpful currents coming out of China from time to time such as cyber attacks, trade squabbles, currency tensions and naval muscle flexing.

Yet as President Nixon would have done you would have to look at the Big Picture and you will see:

- 1 The world is a far safer place since 1972. The risks of conflict on the old bi polar East West – Soviet verses NATO Cold War hostilities are much diminished.
- 2 Three superpowers are like a tripod, a much more solid base for a peaceful and prosperous world than a two super power rivalry based on competing ideologies and huge nuclear arsenals facing each other.
- 3 China has been a huge generator of world trade, world prosperity, and a lifting up of man poorer economies in Asia and Africa. The rising tide of Chinese wealth lifts all boats even if there are uncomfortable knock on effects in some industries.

None of this would happened if President Nixon had not extended the hand of friendship to China and welcomed China into the family of nations.

Today the surly, isolated growling dragon of Chairman Mao’s revolutionary state is gradually transforming itself into a business-friendly, internationally responsible world power. The world’s future with China is far more promising than a world without China. Are there still difficulties? - of course. Are they dangerous or toxic difficulties? – No.

So any contemporary assessment of Richard Nixon has surely to award him the crown for his China initiative as the single most important act of statesmanship in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

I rather wish I could end my lecture on that high note of praise.

But sadly the epilogue on the lives of both my subjects tonight has to conclude on something of an elegiac note which echoes a much quoted line from a British politician Enoch Powell who said, "All political careers end in tears".

Both Margaret Thatcher and Richard Nixon ended their days of power tearfully and prematurely because of character weaknesses.

Margaret Thatcher became so inflexible and so personally poisonous in her relations to her Cabinet at her back benchers that they mounted a coup against her – in my view utterly wrongly.

President Nixon trapped himself in the quagmire of Watergate and paid, with others, the agonisingly heavy price of resignation for his mistakes and character failings.

In the case of both deposed leaders, however, the judgement of historians are steadily becoming more favourable than the strictures of journalists.

In my view, on the stock exchange of history both Margaret Thatcher's shares and Richard Nixon's shares are a good buy – recovery situations as they call them on Wall Street.

And in the real world of historical achievements as opposed to ephemeral headlines that recovery was always inevitable.

I think it is fair to say that my biography of Richard Nixon was the first post Watergate assessment to be revisionist and favourable in its tone, but several others have followed notably by Tom Wicker and most recently Evan Thomas.

But whatever writers may say, in the end we are left with the personalities and the records of these two remarkable leaders.

Both Richard Nixon and Margaret Thatcher were complex characters, not always outwardly agreeable or ever easy to deal with. Paradoxically, however they were both far kinder and more generous in their private acts of unreported compassion than their public images suggested.

As their biographer I liked both of them immensely, warts and all.

What I admired most in Margaret Thatcher was her passionate determination to restore Britain's strength as a nation – which she largely accomplished. She could be maddening as a colleague but she was almost always right on the big issues and principles.

What I admired most in Richard Nixon was his near-genius in foreseeing original outcomes and solutions to intractable foreign policy problems.

Henry Kissinger once said of his boss that when President Nixon made a comment on an international situation, it was like watching him play billiards. You had to keep your eye not only on the initial shot but also for the cannon to see the original direction his mind might be moving in.

I very much appreciated this Nixonian gift of foresight which was at the heart of his foreign policy judgements.

I'll end with a story about this. One day in the early 1980s Richard Nixon was in London, staying in Claridges - he liked to go for a walk in Hyde Park in the afternoons and I was often his walker.

One afternoon just before the walk started I heard on the BBC News that in Rome the Vatican conclave had unexpectedly elected a Polish Cardinal, Cardinal Wojtyla to be the new Pope. To me it seemed just a minor piece of ecclesiastical news.

But Richard Nixon was transfixed by this item of information.

"Polish Pope! Polish Pope!" he said first ruminatively and then excitedly.

"That could be the spark which will set alight the moral flames that will bring down Soviet Communism and liberate Eastern Europe".

Well that was just about what happened. And it was just about what 33 year old Richard Nixon had predicted in that early speech I quoted to the Rotarians of Pomona in 1946.

The fall of the Soviet Union and the Rise of China were epic sagas in the tapestry of history in which Richard Nixon played a long and starring role.

Towards the end of his life his favourite saying was a quotation from Sophocles:

"Sometimes you have to wait until the evening to see how glorious the day has been".

Ladies and Gentlemen I don't think we are anywhere near the evening of what will probably be many centuries of assessment and reassessment of the careers of Richard Nixon and Margaret Thatcher.

But on this particular evening I do think we can already see how glorious their days have been.