

***One Man Against the World: The Tragedy of Richard Nixon***

Tim Weiner

Henry Holt and Co. 384 pp. \$30

**Nixon Reiterated**

*By Melvin Small*

Tim Weiner, winner of a National Book Award for [\*Legacy of Ashes\*](#) (2007), a history of the CIA, and a Pulitzer Prize for journalism, has turned his attention to Richard Nixon in the scathing [\*One Man Against the World\*](#). Because of the continuing release of tape recordings, telcons, and other primary sources—a gift to historians that keeps on giving—Nixon books remain a flourishing cottage industry. Just this publishing season, Weiner has been joined by Evan Thomas ([\*Being Nixon\*](#)) and Irwin Gellman ([\*The President and the Apprentice\*](#)) who also promise new interpretations in part because of recently declassified or underused sources.

Whereas Thomas's biography is balanced and Gellman's history of Nixon's vice presidency tilts toward a favorable conclusion, Weiner's view of Nixon's presidency is a Shakespearean horror story of mendacity, criminality, and paranoia. It is well-written and often thrilling, but for many it will be overkill. Allowing the main characters to speak for themselves, thanks in good measure to the tapes, the author appears to have mined his sources, many of which have been released over the past decade, for the most inflammatory and shocking conversations. Indeed, virtually all of his endnotes refer to the rich collections of primary sources—he rarely cites secondary sources and there is no bibliography. (Disclaimer—I am one of those who enjoys seeing his books cited).

Despite Weiner's ostensible reliance on primary sources, and notwithstanding the publisher's extravagant claims for the book, there is little or nothing that is new here. Most of his seemingly original findings have appeared elsewhere, though uncredited.

Weiner does not offer a full account of the Nixon presidency. He concentrates on foreign policy and Watergate, which makes up more than the last quarter of the book, and little else. Because Nixon was allegedly not interested in domestic policy and fashioned himself the world's leader, Weiner also pretty much ignores that often-productive side of his presidency. He also eschews extended analyses of Nixon's private life, his marriage

and relationship to his children, his use or misuse of alcohol, and misleadingly summarizes Nixon's childhood simply as "unhappy."

As for foreign policy, Weiner centers his analysis on Vietnam, the former Soviet Union, and China, just like Nixon and Kissinger who considered the rest of the world, sometimes including their Lilliputian allies in Europe, beneath their interests. (Luke A. Nichter's excellent new monograph, [\*Richard Nixon and Europe\*](#) (2015) fills that gap admirably). To be sure, Chile, Bangladesh, and the Middle East are considered briefly but Weiner fails to spend any time on the US role in the ouster of Salvador Allende in Chile or the reasons why Washington delayed sending munitions to the Israelis during the Yom Kippur War. As for Nixon's reputed triumphs, Weiner finds his Soviet detente policy inept and ultimately short-lived, his opening to China of little lasting value, and the extrication of the United States from the Vietnam War a debacle.

He blames much of the problem on Nixon's micro-management, a product of his secretive ways and paranoia, which was often based on a woeful lack of expertise (MIRVs) and carelessness (the Sino-American closing statement in 1972). Most surprising of all, Weiner suggests that the master of the world was sometimes uninformed about an international issue in which he was involved.

Most historians of the era will discover, despite Weiner's many new documents, that there is little that is revelatory in *One Man Against the World* aside from previously classified repugnant comments from the president and his cronies. There are no new smoking guns. No doubt, those who are not especially familiar with the era will find much that will interest them in this always lively account, but the outlines of the controversies and interpretations have been known to scholars for several decades even operating with a more limited set of source materials. One wonders how much more is there to discover about the Nixon administration aside from what is uncovered in monographs on specific subjects such as William Burr and Jeffrey P. Kimball's valuable [\*Nixon's Nuclear Specter\*](#) (2015) on the alert in the fall of 1969. This important and readable academic study, which offers the best explanation of the "madman" theory, is based on Burr and Kimball's many years of researching the subject. Weiner, who also discusses the theory, appears to go beyond the notion that a calculating Nixon made-believe he was a madman to frighten his enemies. Weiner depicts Nixon towards the end of his presidency as unhinged and divorced from reality.

The author contends that from the fall of 1973 to his resignation in August 1974, the United States was without a constitutionally elected president. Depressed, confused, and drinking, Nixon left it to Kissinger to handle foreign policy and to his chief of staff, Alexander Haig, to handle the rest of the presidency. Nixon himself would never have accepted this interpretation of his last year in office.

When Weiner leaves his juicy documents he occasionally missteps as when he suggests the 1968 agreement to hold formal peace talks, which Nixon helped to scuttle in November 1968, would have led to a peace agreement. Several weeks after winning election, Nixon accepted the same terms that Johnson had accepted, and those peace talks

meandered without a conclusion until 1973. In addition, Weiner should not write that “Nixon didn’t like Jews” unless he can explain why several were among his trusted advisors. Further he cannot accurately introduce Arnold Hutschnecker as Nixon’s “psychiatrist,” which was not his specialty, without explaining their relationship. And it is piling on to quote Nixon insidiously saying that the Great Wall was “truly a great wall” without continuing the rest of his sentence. Finally, among omissions, it is difficult to understand why the author mentions in his lengthy Watergate section Nixon’s premature decision to resign on 1 August 1974 without introducing his attempt that day to convince Gerald Ford to pardon him.

*One Man Against the World* is certain to dismay readers who are unfamiliar with much of the literature in the field. Its contribution to Nixonology, however, is not especially significant.

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