



## The President who perplexed people

Was Nixon's epoch-making trip to China a radical attempt at genuine peace-making, or a move calculated to invigorate his image and ensure his continuing legacy in the run-up to the 1972 election? **James Naughtie** weighs up the evidence on America's most puzzling President

It was predictable that John Adams would resist writing an opera about Richard Nixon, and not at all surprising that he changed his mind. He was still in his 20s during Nixon's disgrace in the Watergate affair, and as a young American of liberal opinion in the Vietnam years he would have been an unlikely supporter of a President who represented everything the anti-war movement had eventually found intolerable in his predecessor, Lyndon B Johnson. Not an appealing subject for his first opera. Yet, urged on by Peter Sellars, who wanted to put the story on stage, he was persuaded.

You can see why. Nixon was many things, but never simple. As a consequence, he presented a character that is perfectly suited to the opera stage. His motives were often confused and contradictory, the balance between the public figure and the private man edgy, and the difficulty with which he revealed his feelings was always absorbing, even in the moments of awful pathos in which he specialised. Sympathy is hardly the point. Nixon always perplexed people.

Not long ago I talked at length to the film and theatre director Aaron Sorkin, one of whose celebrated productions was *The West Wing*, the television series that ran for seven years from the late 1990s, and depicted the churning events around a fictional president, Jed Bartlet, played by Martin Sheen. I asked Sorkin if he could imagine life in Donald Trump's West Wing, and he said he could. All too easily. Could he dramatise it? 'No.'

The reason was telling. Trump, he thought, would always have to be offstage. You couldn't have him at the centre of the action, because he would appear an empty vessel. What was inside?

### A man of contradictions

Nixon, by contrast, was an endlessly complicated figure. The shabby political operator could also fashion genuine acts of statesmanship

*previous pages*  
Sarah Tynan as Pat Nixon  
in Act II of *Nixon in China* at  
The Royal Danish Theatre,  
Copenhagen, May 2019.

*left*  
Richard Nixon addressing a  
convention of the families  
of American troops taken  
prisoner during the Vietnam  
conflict, October 1972.

towards America's old enemies, and it was always hard to know what he really believed, or why he had set a particular political course. The visit to China in 1972 was the greatest of these puzzles.

Even as he was sending Henry Kissinger, his foreign affairs fixer, on cleverly disguised exploratory missions to see if a bridge could be built to 'Red China', as most Americans still called it, he was pursuing a Vietnam policy that ended in American humiliation in 1973 and involved along the way a brutal and illegal bombing campaign in Cambodia. Simultaneously he was presiding at home over a political operation that took duplicity and law-breaking to such a pitch that it destroyed him. The President who brought China into dialogue with the West was also the first holder of his office to have to resign, after impeachment in 1974.

For Americans of the baby boomer generation, Nixon was ever present. The jowly, uncomfortable Vice President who was edged out by John F Kennedy in the 1960 election, then the humiliated loser in his attempted comeback as Governor of California who announced, in a typically maudlin concession speech, that he wanted to apologise to the 'gentlemen' of the press because 'you won't have Nixon to kick around any more'. But then he was back, as everybody knew he would be, because 1960s politics without Nixon was hard to imagine. It was the game he could never stop playing. As President, he promised an implausibly quick peace in Vietnam, spoke to the first man on the moon, and then set his sights on an international coup that would dazzle his legion of enemies.

He'd been a cheerful purveyor of high-flown anti-communist rhetoric in the 1950s – appearing undisturbed by the witch-hunts of Joe McCarthy – but Nixon in the White House after 1968 was a different figure. He'd certainly developed a subtle understanding of world affairs (of the kind Donald Trump hasn't pretended to attempt) and for all the failures

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*above*  
Richard Nixon speaking at a re-election campaign rally at Nassau County Coliseum, New York, October 1972.

and deceptions of his Vietnam policy, he clearly came to believe that he could leave his own tracks on an era when the Cold War seemed permanent, and in which China, in the period just before he came to office, had produced the horrors of the Cultural Revolution.

### **More than simply a stunt**

He was well aware that the sheer audacity of what he was attempting would be a spectacular political starburst in advance of the 1972 presidential election, and he didn't have to worry about diehard conservative anti-communists, who were hardly going to support an anti-war Democratic candidate, but it would be absurd to imagine that the China trip was conceived entirely as a stunt. It was much more personal than that. Nixon was a politician who longed for the recognition and respect that he believed he was usually denied. In this, at least, there is a resemblance to Trump. But he believed he could get it by engineering an event of world significance – a much more satisfactory answer to mockers and critics than the complaints made at every rally by his successor in the White House nearly 50 years on.



*above*  
Anti-Nixon demonstrators demand the President's impeachment outside the White House, October 1973.

*left*  
Tourists outside the White House read news of Nixon's imminent resignation, August 1974.

It is easy to forget, looking back from this century, how distant and impenetrable China then seemed to most Americans. They knew it as an adversary and that was all. Nixon was taking a voyage into the unknown.

In a sense, he was making his own moon landing – the event that had brightened his first year in office. But was it conceived as a radical and even altruistic act – the old warrior picking up the sword of peace – or did political calculation dictate everything? The event was a television spectacular, because millions of Americans were getting their first glimpse of a land and culture almost none of them had ever seen, with Nixon their guide. He knew in February 1972 that it would surely guarantee a second term in the election later that year, perhaps even

a carving on the granite face of Mount Rushmore some day. But his desperate quest for greater recognition was his fatal flaw. At home, his White House irregulars were already planning the Watergate burglary, just to make sure nothing went wrong with the campaign.

We can never know how his sense of history and his domestic political purposes worked together in his mind. Perhaps, neither did he. He simply saw the opportunity, understood its immense significance, and grabbed it.

### **Operatic insights**

John Adams explores the complexity of Nixon's purpose in the balance between the staged drama of the official meetings – like the sound of *The Three Main Rules of Discipline and the Eight Points of Attention* sung by the military choir on his arrival – and the private thoughts of the protagonists. They are tinged naturally with suspicion, and probably quite a bit of fear, but there is also a pulse of excitement. For both sides, knowing the past, the chance to talk differently about the future was irresistible. And Nixon knew, too, that it might produce a second benefit – progress in arms limitation talks with the Soviet Union, which Kissinger had always seen as a prize just as great as rapprochement with the Chinese. It duly came.

What was Nixon thinking as he came down the steps, toasted the Chinese at the banquet, stood on the Great Wall? At the end of the opera the main characters are allowed to speak for themselves, individually, though their innermost feelings are still left ambiguous, perhaps hidden. That is why the dark baritone of Nixon rings so true, as he sings about himself. Events in China posed questions about him that all Americans were asking, and ask to this day.

He became a byword for chicanery, and his resignation shook the political system. His lachrymose departure from the White House, when he wallowed in nostalgia about his mother and the poverty of his youth, was a moment a generation of Americans later tried to forget. Yet Nixon did go to China and lifted the bamboo curtain. He never made it simple to work him out.

I lived in the United States at the climax of Watergate, as a student, but never saw him in the flesh. As he retreated into his final days in office, he was a distant, almost furtive figure.

But much later, when I was working as a journalist at Westminster in the early 1980s, I found myself waiting for a cab late one night under Big Ben in New Palace Yard. It was a dark night, but I saw a Conservative MP whom I knew emerging from Westminster Hall. He came across the



cobbles and we greeted each other. There was a small group of people behind him. He gestured to them and put one of the most unlikely questions I have ever been asked. "Have you met the President?"

And there, coming out of the shadows, was Nixon. He had been addressing a backbench foreign affairs committee in the course of a private visit. I stuck out a hand, and so did he. I muttered something. A limousine drew up and in a few moments he was gone, into the night.

An unexpected encounter, and one that left me strangely content as a consequence. How else to meet Nixon, however briefly, but in an atmosphere of mystery where nothing is truly settled?

**James Naughtie** is special correspondent for BBC News. His new book, *On the Road – American Adventures from Nixon to Trump*, is published in April.

*left*

Waxwork of Richard Nixon is dismembered and packed for removal from Madame Tussaud's, London, in September 1974, following his resignation the previous month.