

The California Conservatives: Nixon as Populist

Richard M. Nixon Is One of Us.

—*Campaign advertisement, 1946*¹

“Richard Nixon Is Returning to Whittier”—so said the banner that decked the streets of the young naval officer’s Southern California hometown. It was Thursday, November 1, 1945. Nixon, a thirty-two-year-old lieutenant commander back from the South Pacific and doing legal work for the U.S. Navy, had flown in from his post in Middle River, Maryland. A throng of some forty supporters turned out at Whittier’s Dinner Bell Ranch to launch his bid to become their next congressman.²

Lean and smart in his navy uniform, Nixon stepped forward to speak. Close to six feet, with a thick head of dark hair and a strong jaw, he looked earnest, confident, and handsome. Before him sat a crowd of Republican leaders from California’s 12th district: Roy Day, an advertising salesman for the *Pomona Progress-Bulletin*; State Representative Tom Erwin; Harry Schuyler, a rancher and former Rotary Club president. They sat rapt as Nixon delivered a sharp rebuke to the New Deal. He told the audience that he and his fellow returning servicemen had grown tired of government paternalism, frustrated with “standing in line” while the federal bureaucracy, which had swollen over twelve years of Democratic domi-

nance, lumbered to meet their needs. Veterans, he said, "don't want the dole, nor do they want a governmental employment or bread lines. They want a fair chance at the American way of life."³

The local businessmen swooned. This boyish, clean-cut orator exhibited all the requisite traits for a successful political career: churchgoing parents; good schools (Whittier College, Duke Law School); a local legal practice; navy service; a poised, pretty wife and a family sure to follow. His words displayed an understanding of others like him—young, ready to work, and seeking a shot at the American Dream. He was devoted, too, to the principles of patriotism, church, and the free market to which these Californians had long subscribed. He seemed, in short, an authentic emblem of the promise of the budding postwar age.

Nixon's speech was a success, but the next day he had more auditioning to do. He had flown to California at the urging of an ad hoc body called the "Committee of 100," a group of in fact 104 local activists who had taken it upon themselves to vet Republican candidates for the upcoming congressional race. On Friday afternoon, Nixon lunched with key committee members at Los Angeles's posh University Club. Then, that night, he gave his formal audition before the whole group at Whittier's William Penn Hotel. Appearing after five other hopefuls, Nixon said he wanted to help young families enjoy the fruits of America's victory, and he again attacked Washington liberalism as the impediment to progress. In the lucid, methodical style that would become his trademark, he sketched a landscape divided into two camps. "One advocated by the New Deal is government control regulating our lives," he said. "The other calls for individual freedoms and all that initiative can produce. I hold with the latter viewpoint. I believe the returning veterans, and I have talked to many of them in the foxholes, will not be satisfied with a dole or a government handout. They want a respectable job in private industry, where they will be recognized for what they produce, or they want an opportunity to start their own business."⁴

Nixon called this program "practical liberalism." The content of the speeches, however, made it clear that he opposed the philosophy of Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman, with which the term "liberalism"

had been increasingly associated since the 1930s.* Although Nixon sought to attract more than just ultraconservatives, he did not lack for ideological vigor. Indeed, some committee members voiced satisfaction that they had found a solid "conservative" to take on five-term incumbent Jerry Voorhis, a classic New Deal liberal.⁵

As important as Nixon's program was his demeanor. "He was neatly dressed. He was serious. He replied to questions in short, crisp terms," recalled Murray Chotiner, the politico who later became Nixon's top strategist. "This young fellow was not trying to put on a show. . . . He seemed intelligent, forceful, and with a capacity for growth." Moreover, after the lackluster, hedging performances of his rivals, some of whom had blanched at a full-throated attack on the incumbent, Nixon came across as "an electrifying personality," as one committee member said. Nixon was a fighter, too. He told Herman Perry, the Whittier banker who had first encouraged him to run, that he would "tear Voorhis to pieces," and pledged before the group to "put on an aggressive and vigorous campaign." When the committee reconvened later that month, Nixon won 63 votes from the seventy-seven members who attended. A second ballot made it unanimous.⁶

The mood during Nixon's visit was caught by Roy Day, the committee's founder, who exulted: "This man is salable merchandise!" An advertising salesman, Day was speaking in the idiom of his trade. But he was also recognizing that politics involved the traffic of images and that Richard M. Nixon projected a winning one, especially within this Southern California world of rising affluence and resentment toward Washington. From the start of his career, Nixon, even among politicians, was viewed as emblematic of larger currents in society—in this case, as representative of notions of a burgeoning conservative populism, but in other situations as

* It was in using the modifier "practical" that Nixon meant to distinguish himself from his would-be opponent, Jerry Voorhis, whom he saw as a woolly-minded idealist. Nixon meant the term "liberalism" in its older sense, to signify a creed of limited government and economic freedom. He avoided "conservative" because at the time it evoked the right-wing extremism, and in recent elections avowedly conservative candidates had repeatedly failed to vanquish Voorhis.

representative of darker forces as well. A central reason for this tendency was Nixon's character. Intensely private yet hungry for approval, he had always been both protective of his feelings and eager to convey a positive impression. These inclinations produced an enthusiasm for the craft of political image making and an intuitive grasp of the symbolism of politics—traits that were on display in 1945.

Besides his character, however, Nixon's affinity for image craft was also rooted in the distinct political culture of twentieth-century California, where, before the rest of the country, the cultivation of a candidate's image was a key to electoral success. Progressive Era reforms in the Golden State had allowed for "cross-filing" in elections, permitting candidates to run in both parties' primaries at once. Designed to weaken party bosses, the policy meant that a candidate could clinch victory by winning both primaries, as happened more often than not. As a result, California journalist Carey McWilliams noted, "candidates must depend upon individual political merchandising, that is, they must 'sell' themselves as candidates . . . they must maintain a general aura of non-partisanship."⁷ In addition, California was home to a vanguard of professional image consultants, notably the team of Clem Whitaker and Leone Baxter, who revolutionized campaigns in the 1930s and 1940s. Trained in public relations, drawing on the culture of nearby Hollywood, they devised cutting-edge techniques to "sell" candidates' personae in a mass media age. As Whitaker told a local public relations society in 1948, winning the vote of "Mr. and Mrs. Average Citizen" in the modern era meant playing to their love of "a good hot battle" or their wish "to be entertained"—either putting on a fight or putting on a show. Either approach had to use simple, clear themes that would remain linked to the candidate.⁸

Nixon self-consciously embraced the task of crafting a winning image. In the 1946 campaign and throughout his early career—culminating in his famous Checkers speech of 1952—he would expertly burnish the self-portrait he had put forward at Whittier's Dinner Bell Ranch and Los Angeles's William Penn Hotel in November 1945. It was a portrait that transcended ideology, one of a clean-cut, upright avatar of the hopes of Americans who looked forward to a new era of opportunity and ease after the depression and the war. Ideology wasn't absent: Nixon struck his

backers as an eager, articulate voice for the conservative agenda they believed would usher in prosperity. But the image went beyond ideology; it built on the sympathy that Nixon displayed for those who were struggling, the fight he showed in taking on the Washington bureaucracy. It blended conservative nostrums and pioneer mythology to fashion Richard Nixon as an authentic, ordinary American—the personification, quite literally, of his supporters' values. Long before the right-wing ascendancy of the 1980s, Nixon used populist imagery* to extend conservatism's appeal beyond its upper-class base and to reach success by reviving, in his person and persona, the dream of the self-made man.⁹

Nixon-watchers have long debated whether the candidate's man-of-the-people self-portrait was genuine or a cynical contrivance. To his critics, who didn't emerge as an identifiable bloc until some years later,[†] Nixon's presentation was thoroughly phony, a guise assumed by a lackey of oilmen and fat cats. His defenders have argued otherwise, seeking to show that his advocates were not plutocrats but "small-business men" or "entrepreneurs." The answer, of course, depends on your perspective and definitions, and can be endlessly debated. As with most debates about the "real" Nixon, it's finally less important than the indisputable allure he held for California voters. Whatever your judgment about the purity of Nixon's common-man persona, the image itself mattered. It launched Nixon's career; it signaled the potency of conservative populism; and it nourished a culture in which the traffic in imagery was a constant and overriding concern.¹⁰

Although Richard Nixon ranks among the most prominent postwar Republicans, historians of American conservatism have never been sure

* "Populism" once denoted the ideas of the old People's Party. Some historians stingily reserve the term for them alone. Other writers now use it, as the journalist Michael Kinsley has said, as nothing more than a synonym for "popular." Between these extremes, Kevin Phillips, Michael Kazin, and others have defined it to mean a set of symbols that appeals to an ostensibly noble common folk against a privileged elite. This sense of the word, which I am using, has become commonly accepted in recent years.

† See chapter 2.

what to do with him. Between the 1940s and the 1980s, conservatism transformed itself from an elitist and dated doctrine of the rich into a governing philosophy that united wealthy businessmen, middle-class professionals, and disaffected wage earners under a populist banner. In tracking this shift, historians, taking their cues from the right's own official chroniclers, have refined a familiar narrative: Originally a besieged remnant of lonely believers, the postwar American right proceeded, through F. A. Hayek's manifesto *The Road to Serfdom* and William F. Buckley's flamboyant *National Review*, to fashion a cogent challenge to the reigning New Deal orthodoxy. By the 1960s, the story goes, the Republican Party shook the grip of its Eastern Democrat wannabes and embraced unadulterated conservatism in the person of the rugged Arizona senator Barry Goldwater, its 1964 presidential nominee. Although Goldwater lost, the grassroots organizers he inspired labored for a decade to harness popular frustration with taxes, big government, and liberalism—a struggle that bore fruit with Ronald Reagan's election as president in 1980.

These narratives typically cast Nixon as a bit player with a peripheral or even detrimental role. His precocious emergence in the 1940s as a leader of the right is discounted because as vice president he adopted Dwight Eisenhower's moderate "modern Republicanism," whereupon many ultraconservatives concluded he wasn't truly one of them. Meanwhile, his recruitment, as president, of socially conservative Democrats and independents into the GOP fold is dismissed as a latecomer's rip-off of third-party candidate George Wallace. Several factors account for this downplaying of Nixon's role. The relatively liberal slant of his presidential policies has led some historians to view his administration as a continuation of the Great Society rather than the start of its undoing. The short-term damage that Watergate inflicted on the GOP lent a certain logic (and satisfaction) to the decision to write Nixon out of the story. Historians consequently have viewed his presidency as an interruption of, rather than a chapter in, conservatism's postwar rise.¹¹

The main reason Nixon has been overlooked in the rise of the right, however, is one of historical focus. In 1955, the political scientist Clinton Rossiter defined "the contemporary right" as "those who now admit to distaste for the dominant political theory and practice of the twenty years

between Hoover and Eisenhower." Within that spectrum, Rossiter identified four different groups (between which, he stressed, there existed not lines but only "imperceptible gradation"): "the lunatic right" of "professional haters" such as Gerald L. K. Smith and John Birch Society founder Robert Welch; the "ultraconservatives" such as Buckley, Goldwater, and Senator Joe McCarthy; "middling conservatives" such as Nixon, Herbert Hoover, and editorialists at *Life* and the *Saturday Evening Post*; and "liberal conservatives" such as Earl Warren and Nelson Rockefeller. Of these groups, historians have written overwhelmingly about the ultraconservatives and even the so-called lunatic fringe: the McCarthy acolytes, *National Review* aficionados, Goldwater enthusiasts, and hard-core Reaganites. Indeed, sometimes the terms "conservatism" and "the right" are used to refer *only* to the Republican Party's extremists. This focus ignores those mainstream, middling conservatives—the businessmen and housewives, realtors and shopkeepers, bankers and doctors—who were critical to the right's successes. To these "Middle Americans," as Nixon called them, the Whittier congressman was as important as Goldwater or Reagan.¹²

Like all successful parties in the United States, the Republican Party has triumphed only when it articulated a philosophy that inspired its base while also attracting Americans who lie closer to the center. In the late twentieth century, Republicans reached this goal by shedding their old image as the defenders of the rich and recasting themselves as the tribune of the people, winning the loyalties of middle-income Americans who had once flocked to the Democrats' belief in state-sponsored largesse. The Republicans did so through conservative populism: a fusion of old anti-statist principles with the symbols and language of identification with the common man. Conservative populism rewrote the New Deal equation: Instead of protecting the citizen from the depredations of big business and safeguarding individual rights, government itself, piloted by decadent liberal elites, became the oppressor. Free-market economics and a minimal state became the people's salvation.

Nixon pioneered the use of populist language and imagery in the service of free-market economics long before the Reagan revolution, before the much-celebrated "backlash" against the liberal indulgences of the 1960s, even before McCarthy became a household name. When Nixon

spoke about "the forgotten man" in 1968, he was not cribbing from George Wallace. He was cribbing from his own speeches in 1946.

Nixon began to refashion conservatism as early as that first campaign. At the time, analysts were writing off conservatism as an atavistic creed. But Southern California was ripe for a Republican revival. Fourteen years of New Deal regulations and wartime restraints had brought unprecedented federal control over how Americans could conduct their business, and nowhere did that control provoke greater resentment than in the havens of pioneer capitalists along the lower Pacific Coast.¹³

The state of California in its short life had come to epitomize for many the American Dream. The discovery of gold at Sutter's Mill near San Francisco in 1849 was like a Big Bang, generating an ever-expanding universe of wealth from nothing in a blink. Overnight, the Gold Rush drew hordes of fortune-seekers to the West Coast. In two years the sleepy territory became the nation's thirty-seventh state. For the next century, the Golden State's promise of sunshine, ocean, and abundant land lured settlers—some yearning for riches, others for just a fresh start. Some got wealthy in real estate, oil, manufacturing, farming, ranching, the movies, or new retailing ventures such as supermarkets. Others did not, yet still fed, by their sheer numbers, robust markets that attracted more newcomers, further swelling California's ranks. The state's population climbed almost 45 percent per decade. In the 1940s, thanks to droves of arrivals seeking wartime manufacturing work (coming on the heels of the Dust Bowl migration), it soared past Ohio in residents and nearly passed Pennsylvania as the second most populous state in the country.¹⁴

In particular, the region known as the Southland, stretching from Santa Barbara through Los Angeles and Orange County down to San Diego, provided a Mecca for plucky migrants. Most hailed from towns in Michigan and Indiana, Illinois and Kansas, and elsewhere in the Midwest. John Gunther dubbed Los Angeles "Iowa with palms" in his travelogue *Inside U.S.A.* (1947); tens of thousands would drive their Chevys and Dodges to eat fried chicken and hard-boiled eggs at Iowa State Society picnics in Long Beach's Bixby Park. California teemed, in the words of jour-

nalist Willard Huntington Wright, with "leading citizens from Wichita, honorary pallbearers from Emmetsburg, Good Templars from Sedalia, honest spinsters from Grundy Center—all commonplace people."¹⁵

From the Heartland to the Southland these migrants brought provincial values and Old Guard loyalties. Families staked out communities concentrated on Protestant churches and civic clubs. They championed prohibition, banned public dancing, restricted beachfront dress. The Ku Klux Klan enjoyed a heyday in the Southland, as its members won elected office in numerous Orange County towns. So did evangelical cults and enthusiasms, including the following of the celebrated preacher Aimee Semple McPherson. Nixon's Whittier was just one of many towns that recoiled at what its citizens considered Hollywood's corrupting influences and kept its cinemas closed on Sundays.¹⁶

The displaced Midwesterners brought a Main Street trust in laissez-faire economics, and the possibilities for profit afforded by California's ample land and resources fortified such predilections. Real estate developers, speculators, tourism promoters, ranchers, and growers developing large-scale farming ventures—all saw opportunities to make fortunes in the still sparsely settled territory, free of governmental interference. But while powerful railroad magnates and canny speculators locked up future wealth during the land-grab years, striving workers watched their fantasies wither in the sun. Class conflict rocked the Southland, resulting in strikes and pitched labor battles. In 1910, two syndicalists, John and James McNamara, dynamited the Los Angeles Times Building, owned by the baronial publisher Harrison Gray Otis, searing an antipathy to labor into the minds of California businessmen for decades to come.¹⁷

But if California's businessmen resembled their eastern counterparts in their enmity toward labor, their politics also differed from capitalist countrymen. The West's frontiersmen relied heavily on Wall Street financiers and powerful railroad companies, and that dependency bred resentment. Californians, consequently, were receptive to reforms that targeted oppressive monopolies and corrupt politicians. During the depression, a series of grass-roots movements emerged to fight the stark economic inequity. Francis Townsend, a Long Beach doctor, won a national following with his call for a federal guarantee of old age pensions; a crusade

known as "Ham and Eggs" nearly secured passage of a similar pension measure on the state ballot; and the muckraker Upton Sinclair ran for governor in 1934 on a bold, socialistic program called End Poverty in California, which brought on the combined assault of the state's most entrenched forces—and Sinclair's rout.¹⁸

Where dependency on banks and railroads fueled an anti-corporate impulse, the growing presence of the federal government fed a hatred of Washington during the 1930s and 1940s. Struggling workers might be grateful for a federal safety net. But those who had secured a foothold and were eager to start climbing felt the federal government held them back. Given the development of public works projects and the wartime boom in military spending (increasingly central to the Southland's economy), there was much to resent.¹⁹ Projects like the development of the Central Valley infused millions of dollars into the state. Vital industries—oil, power, communications—came under Washington's watch; the federal bureaucracy more than tripled between 1940 and 1945 to encompass an unheard of 3.5 million employees. New corporate taxes helped pay for it all. Businessmen believed that FDR was exploiting the Depression and the war to enact oppressive taxes and regulations, out of either a deluded faith in central planning or a sinister plot to install a dictatorship. Conservatives routinely compared New Deal programs to those of Soviet communism. They called Roosevelt's liberalism "creeping socialism," a first step in the creation of a leviathan state. In Whittier, city leaders had even refused a Works Progress Administration jobs program because it smacked of "Bolshevik" politics.²⁰

The antagonism toward anything that resembled collectivism showed up in the apocalyptic language that Southland Republicans used. "The combination of great political and economic power in the hands of New Deal government threatens to destroy those processes upon which the Republic is founded," declared a 1946 brochure issued by the Los Angeles County Republican Central Committee. "Under the guise of public welfare the American people are being subjected to the will of multiple bureaucratic agencies and personalities." This program had taken hold, Republicans believed, because "special minority groups and blocs" had imposed their agenda from above, using "the most voluminous propaganda hand-outs in American history."²¹

Yet conservatives also glimpsed grounds for hope. Roosevelt was gone. The inexperienced Truman seemed a feckless substitute, likely to be toppled soon. Peace held out the prospect of deregulation, and Americans were waking up to the Communist threat. California's Republicans eyed a chance to regain national power for the first time in decades. They could envision a new era, bright and full of opportunity. In this climate, rife with both hope and fear, Richard Nixon began his lifelong career in politics.

As early as the spring of 1945, Whittier Republicans had been training their sights on Jerry Voorhis. A Yale-educated patrician with a liberal voting record, Voorhis was the scourge of local insurance firms, oil drillers, agribusiness, and banks. He had always been an anomaly in a district that tilted to the right, but he had held onto his seat, even thrived, by playing to the district's deep distrust of remote, centralized power. During the New Deal, that power had been embodied in the Eastern businesses and financial houses—an equation that favored the Democrats. Voorhis had benefited, too, from the Republicans' recent choice of candidates, whose unreconstructed capitalism had seemed anachronistic and whose racial and religious bigotry (in some cases) had proved unpalatable. Most prominent among the GOP activists was Roy Day, the advertising man, who sensed that 1946 might be the Republicans' year and set about assembling a team to find a new—conservative—congressman.

The Committee of 100 that Day put together sometimes referred to its membership as "the amateurs," since they weren't officially part of the Republican Party. Yet many of the group's members had served as assemblymen, local committeemen, and officials in low-level campaigns of years past. Though not of statewide repute and not powerful industrialists (as some of Nixon's critics later alleged), they commanded, as Day recalled, "a following." The group included, he said, not just "the big shots" and "the presidents of the bank" but a wide sampling of local power brokers from the Scout movement, women's clubs, and civic groups. White, middle-aged, Protestant, mostly male, and of what historian Herbert Parmet called "Rotarian character," they included bankers and insurance men, realtors and ranchers, oilmen and salesmen and cor-

porate attorneys. Nixon remembered these early backers as "typical representatives of the Southern California middle class," which in fact entailed some affluence, as Los Angeles County had by 1946 become the wealthiest county in the United States.²²

Ideologically, the group was decidedly conservative, even if that term was not always embraced. The members were, said committee member Gerald Kepple, a telephone company vice president, "people who believed in individual enterprise and believed that we had, under the New Deal, gone too far afield." One committee member, Herbert Spencer, joked that "my friends all say I am a hidebound reactionary," yet insisted that he merely wished to preserve the capitalist system under which he had prospered so that "young people starting out with nothing may once again have the chance to establish themselves and get ahead in the world." Many feared that socialism, or communism, or collectivism—what you called it didn't matter much—might be on its way to world domination. The Cold War was beginning; with Nazism vanquished, many feared communism would now conquer the globe. Roy Day was not just practicing his rhetoric when he proclaimed to his Committee of 100: "We must win in 1946 and do our part to preserve a Constitutional form of government in this country, a government responsible to the people, and free from bureaucratic control." The stakes, he believed, really were that high.²³

From the southern Los Angeles border to the San Gabriel Mountains, the committee members combed the district, looking for a candidate with the right combination of distaste for the New Deal and appeal to Voorhis voters. They even publicized the search with a press release that made front-page news in twenty-six of the mostly Republican-run local papers:

WANTED, Congressman candidate with no previous experience to defeat a man who has represented the district in the House for ten years. Any young man, resident of the district, preferably a veteran, fair education, no political strings or obligations and possessed of a few ideas for betterment of country at large, may apply for the job. Applicants will be reviewed by 100 interested citizens who will guarantee support but will not obligate the candidate in any way.

For many months, the dragnet proved fruitless. But in September, Herman Perry, the manager of the local branch of the Bank of America, sub-

mitted Nixon's name. Perry attended the same Quaker church as Nixon's family and had befriended the young lawyer when they shared an office building during Nixon's years in Whittier after law school. Nixon had flirted with politics in those years and had almost run for state assembly. He "had been 'noticed,'" recalled committee member McIntyre Faries, an attorney from Pasadena and national GOP activist, "as a good speaker and a man of promise." Having since served in the war and witnessed the regulatory state up close as an official at the Office of Price Administration, Nixon possessed, as Perry put it, "the personal appeal, the legal qualifications. He had been in Washington and around the world. In my mind he was a natural." Perry wrote to Nixon, who jumped at the chance. In November, he flew to Whittier for his audition.²⁴ After getting the nod, he took a couple of months to extricate himself from his navy obligations, then returned to Whittier in January 1946 to begin his campaign.

Nixon's 1946 campaign has been remembered mostly for his use of anti-communism. That issue, however, became prominent only in the fall. During the winter and spring before the Republican primary, Nixon made a name for himself by fashioning an image as the embodiment of this new conservative populist creed. He sought to rid the Republican Party of its taints and to reach voters struggling during the difficult reconversion to a peacetime economy and a Cold War.

Nixon was hardly the only veteran coming home that winter. Of 12 million Americans in the military on V-J Day, some 10 million were trading in their uniforms for work clothes. The reconversion from a wartime to a peacetime economy brought trepidation. Without military exigencies forcing the full-tilt production that had more than doubled the gross national product since 1940, the economy, it was feared, was now poised to collapse. A *Fortune* magazine survey found leading executives foretelling another depression. The rejuvenated economy, combined with rationing of goods and price controls, had amassed \$136 billion in unspent savings by the war's end; now pent-up demand for meat and cigarettes, tires and nylon stockings, threatened to loose a torrential inflation. To smooth the transition, Truman in his 1946 State of the Union address called for another year

of controls—a prescription that drew fusillades from the Chamber of Commerce and the National Association of Manufacturers, who feared that production would be throttled and long-deferred profits would stay low. They wanted the Office of Price Administration abolished altogether.²⁵

Workers had grievances of their own. Freed of its wartime pledge not to agitate, labor undertook a series of actions to demand higher wages and workplace control. Starting with the United Automobile Workers strike of November 1945, 4.5 million steelworkers, electricians, dockworkers, railroad employees, coal miners, and others walked off the job in the year that followed—in the greatest one-year eruption of strikes in U.S. history. Some 116 million days of work were lost. For veterans, anxieties centered on finding good jobs and homes. In California the situation was acute, since so many military employees there had worked in aircraft and shipbuilding, where job cutbacks were high. Washington's solution was to extend benefits for education and home ownership, notably in the 1944 GI Bill of Rights and Veterans Administration–assisted mortgages. But to Southland businessmen, the key was to remove the artificial controls on rent that made housing scarce and regulations that kept businesses from creating jobs.²⁶

Nixon was aware of the issues on voters' minds. But as he plunged into retail politics, he at first refrained from offering a concrete platform. In a letter to Roy Day on November 29, 1945, he spoke vaguely of a "progressive and constructive program designed to promote industrial peace," of a foreign policy "responsive to the will of the people," and of "positive action" to address "the needs of the district." As for his economic philosophy, he stressed his desire for minimal government, although he stopped short of endorsing his supporters' calls to roll back New Deal staples such as Social Security. He was more content to state that "the inventive genius and industrial know-how which have made America great must not be stifled by unnecessary bureaucratic restrictions." At other times he echoed Day's shrill prophecies, warning of "economic dictatorship by irresponsible government agencies."²⁷

After winning over the Committee of 100, Nixon knew that core Republican activists would stand behind him. He next had to appeal to primary voters, who had weaker partisan attachments. He explained to

Day, who was preparing to assume the role of campaign manager, that "we definitely should not come out on issues too early. . . . We thereby avoid giving Voorhis anything to shoot at." (As he would throughout his career, Nixon managed his campaign more than his campaign manager did.) Instead of staking out controversial stands, Nixon toured the district and listened to voters. At small gatherings, coffee klatches, and civic clubs, he modestly introduced himself to likely voters. "He would ask them what they wanted," Day remembered, "and he would let them speak their piece." Dozens of small towns dotted the district, and each had chapters of one club or another—an Elks or Kiwanis or Rotary Club—where citizens met to hear talks and hold dinners. Starting in January, Nixon made the rounds, garnering daily write-ups in local papers. On January 14, he visited the Whittier Optimist Club; the next day he spoke at Post 51 of the American Legion; and so on, every day, throughout the winter and spring. Escorted by Day and Frank Jorgensen, a Metropolitan Life insurance executive and Committee of 100 leader, he crisscrossed the district, building a base. He made a strong impression. With his healthful, youthful aura and innate "magnetism," said Whittier lawyer Wallace Black, Nixon seemed "a kind of fair-haired boy around Whittier . . . [a] natural choice for political office." "He was always the type of fellow that rose to the top and was the president of this and the president of that," Gerald Kepple agreed, "and always had a sense of leadership."²⁸

At first, Nixon listened more than he lectured. Unlike a previous candidate, Roy Day recalled, who put off voters by "telling everybody what *he* was going to do for *them*," Nixon "would ask people what they would like to have from their government." Voters told of their battles with regulations. Builders resented federal rent controls that cut their profits; chicken farmers protested price limits on meat; entrepreneurs fumed at the shortage of ready capital; consumers fretted at the shortages they blamed on government regulations. Nixon integrated these comments into his speeches. He praised "small business," which he called "the hope of America." He sketched out an economic program: dismantling the bureaucracy, removing price controls, fighting inflation by paying off the national debt, curtailing the "lavish spending of government money," and other laissez-faire nostrums that sounded newly promising during the reconversion.²⁹

This constellation of ideas was already recognizable in 1946 as modern conservatism. Yet Nixon shunned the label. He still hoped to reclaim the term "liberal," which Roosevelt had appropriated. "Conservative," Nixon realized, smacked of the obeisance to corporate power that many thought had characterized the Republican Party since the days of the robber barons. "We cannot talk of being conservative. That is bankers' talk," he asserted, knowing full well that bankers and self-proclaimed conservatives were among his most ardent boosters. Yet it was against not conservatism but Voorhis's impractical, socialistic "idealism" that Nixon juxtaposed his own "practical liberalism." "The liberal's first task," he noted, ". . . and the mark by which you can tell a true one, is to remind men that only good individuals, whether rich or poor, can make a good society." Nixon was groping for language that would rally the Committee of 100 and other regulars and also reach beyond the party's base. To win a majority in a district that had elected Voorhis five times, he realized, preaching to the choir was not enough. "We need every Republican and a few Democrats to win," he told Day, prodding his campaign manager to "bring in the liberal fringe Republicans."³⁰

Nixon also appreciated the Southland's independent voting habits and image-centered politics. As was common, he registered in the Democratic primary as well as the Republican contest, and cultivated an aura that would not only attract fence-sitters but transcend partisan categories altogether. Doing so meant steering clear of negative associations with the GOP. A Gallup poll taken in February 1946 showed that the public viewed his party as "the party of privilege and wealth." Only one fifth of voters thought the party cared about "men and women of average income." Nixon confronted the charge head-on, courting those who remained leery of Republican orthodoxy. "The Republican party has been labeled the party of big business and privilege," he said at a Lincoln Day speech in Pomona. "The charge is not justified by the record. Republicans live on both sides of the tracks." Nixon pried loose from the New Deal fold voters with weak ideological allegiances who wanted practical answers to everyday problems.³¹

Yet Nixon didn't run as a man of the left. On a few issues, his positions

did place him closer to the center than to the right: he talked of extending Social Security, which was still anathema to the far right, and he rejected his party's isolationism on foreign affairs. On other issues, Nixon masked his conservative positions through finely phrased arguments. In offering what he called a "New Labor Policy," for example, he attributed the state's labor strife to tyrannical union bosses, violent labor radicalism, and the "undemocratic" closed shop. But he took pains not to castigate the workers themselves. If his policy was anti-labor, it was not anti-laborer.³²

The heart of Nixon's campaign, however, wasn't his occasional centrist position or passing gesture to Democratic constituencies. The key was the populist cast he gave to his conservative beliefs. He styled himself a champion of the Southland's unprivileged, industrious men on the make. "Our national growth has been due to the fact that men of all classes, creeds and races had an opportunity in America to make individual contributions to the national community and to be rewarded," Nixon told audiences. "Emphasis was on freedom for the individual, private enterprise."³³

His favorite populist device was to invoke what he called "the forgotten man." The phrase was first coined by the nineteenth-century Social Darwinist William Graham Sumner and then became part of Roosevelt's vocabulary in the 1930s. Reclaiming the term for conservatism, Nixon painted the forgotten man as one who worked hard, maybe had fought for his country, and now, in trying to provide for his family, faced a stifled economy and an unresponsive bureaucracy. He built up a roster of average citizens, sprinkling the list, as he recited it in speeches, with details gleaned from his conversations: "the vet," the "rabbit grower," "chicken men," the "grocer forced to buy mustard to get mayonnaise," the "butcher dealing in [the] black market against his will," the "housewife," the "small contractor," "the vet [again] trying to get a loan under a ridiculous plan which is unworkable." An elastic category that could include the working class, the bourgeoisie, and even the well-to-do who resented Washington's power, "the forgotten man" was central to Nixon's appeals in 1946 and was a forerunner to the "Middle Americans" and the "Silent Majority" to whom he would appeal decades later.³⁴

. . .

To advance his message of conservative populism, Nixon touted his own biography, painting himself as a latter-day Horatio Alger. First, he underscored his status as a Navy veteran. At the civic clubs, he recounted his experiences in the South Pacific, on Bougainville and Green Island in the Solomon Islands, where he had (once) come under enemy fire. Rather than boasting about his standing as an officer, Nixon presented himself as one of the guys in the foxholes. As if describing scenes from a Hollywood war movie, he told of how he and his comrades—"a typical American melting pot crew" of rich and poor, Texan and New Yorker, Mexican and Indian—put aside differences to fight a common foe.³⁵ He recalled how they bathed in fungus-filled tidepools and faced sweltering humidity and water shortages. The experiences, he said, gave him an appreciation for the plight of the young soldiers and sailors, the war's unsung heroes. "GIs are mighty good kids," Nixon told his audiences, "and it is up to us to help them and give them the opportunities they deserve."³⁶

In 1946, political aspirants around the country (including John F. Kennedy in Boston) were parlaying their battle stars into national office. In the 12th district, the Committee of 100 had made military experience a sine qua non. Service was a sign of the patriotism that the Southland's conservatives prized and would counter the recent inclination of veterans, as beneficiaries of the New Deal's largesse, to vote Democratic. Nixon's veteran status also highlighted Voorhis's lack of wartime service, which Roy Day argued was "a weak point" that made the incumbent seem effete and even un-American. Day urged local campaign chairmen to "secure a well-known returned service man" to head a Veterans-for-Nixon Committee in every community, and recruited a local car dealer to write and distribute "a non-partisan appeal from veteran to veteran to send a veteran to Congress."³⁷ Nixon's advertisements proclaimed: "He knows what it means to sleep in a foxhole—exist on K rations—'sweat out' an air raid. As a veteran he knows firsthand the problems of other veterans." The campaign biographies released by Murray Chotiner, the campaign's part-time public relations consultant, touted the candidate as a "clean, forthright young American who fought in defense of his country in the stinking mud

and jungles of the Solomons." Nixon joined the American Legion and the Veterans of Foreign Wars.³⁸

Religion, too, constituted a key to Nixon's conservative populism. Southland conservatives thought nothing of praising a candidate as a "fine Christian"; churchgoing meant integrity. Herman Perry had lobbied for Nixon because he came "from good Quaker stock"—an important selling point in towns like Whittier, a Quaker redoubt.* Given Voorhis's own reputation as a churchgoer, Roy Day argued, it was "imperative that we crack into Voorhis' church following, and NIXON can do it." He instructed campaign workers to arrange afternoon teas for Nixon to attend, "sponsored by some prominent lady in the community, preferably with good church connections." Nixon's old law partner, Tom Bewley, drafted a letter to a local clergyman, assuring him that Nixon "has taken part in the church's activities and given of his time and talents to church work. He is a firm believer in our doctrine." Bewley also praised Nixon as a believer in temperance. Campaign ads told voters that Nixon "typified the American way of service to God" and embodied "the solid heritage of the Quaker faith."³⁹

Lastly, Nixon presented himself as an exemplary young family man. His wife, Pat, worked full time on the campaign, attending events with Nixon or on her own, despite being many months pregnant. When she delivered a baby girl, Tricia, on February 19, Nixon's backer John Cassidy alerted the local papers, gaining the candidate free, and fawning, coverage. The *Whittier News* ran a photograph of the joyous parents and baby—the model postwar family. Under a three-column headline, an article clucked over the "perfect young lady" and "her lovely mother," and quoted Nixon, who used the occasion to speak about "the grave responsibilities for all of us" at this moment of American crisis. Afterward, Nixon praised Cassidy for his "excellent job in getting out the publicity on Mrs. Nixon and our new baby." Nixon said it was "the best and most effective piece of publicity which has been sent out."⁴⁰

* California Quakerism differed from the Eastern liberal-pacifist variety. Influenced by fundamentalist Protestantism, it placed more of a stress on emotion. This difference has been used to suggest how Nixon could reconcile his faith with his pugnacious campaign style.

Voters grew familiar with an assortment of Nixon's life experiences. "Richard M. Nixon Is One of Us," declared a newspaper ad that reviewed the highlights. Having been raised on a farm, it said, "he has a working knowledge of farm problems . . ." Having pumped gas at his father's service station, "he knows what it means to earn a dollar—the problems of the working man." Having done contract work for the U.S. Navy, he possessed a "practical knowledge of business problems." And having become a father, the ad asserted, "he wants his child and your child to live and work in a free country, with the chance to advance."⁴¹

Later in his career, many would see this portrayal of Nixon as nothing but marketing. But the record of his first campaign shows little doubt among Southern Californians that he embodied their values. Nixon's self-presentation stirred many voters. Describing herself as the wife of an orange grower, one Lillian Amberson wrote Nixon that he had been a smash at the Alhambra-San Gabriel Women's Republican Study Club. "We are still receiving reports from people who were at the meeting . . . everyone is so enthusiastic." Nixon's schedule grew crowded as solicitations poured in. Hector M. Powell, after hearing Nixon at the South Pasadena Kiwanis Club, asked the candidate to speak again before his Masonic Lodge. "We will be happy to have you use the same talk that thrilled our Kiwanis Club, 'A Service Man Looks to the Future.'"⁴²

Editors and publishers joined the cheerleading. Upon meeting Nixon in May, the *Los Angeles Times's* political editor Kyle Palmer—known throughout California as a fount of political information, a wheeler-dealer, and a kingmaker—judged him "serious, determined . . . an extraordinary man." Publisher Norman Chandler, a local titan, liked Nixon's "fight and fire," his "forthrightness, and the way he spoke," and urged Palmer to endorse him. Herb Klein, a friendly editor for the *Alhambra Post-Advocate* and later a Nixon aide, remembered that Nixon handily sewed up the "enthusiastic editorial support" of the mostly conservative editors and publishers of the area's papers.⁴³

Nixon also spoke directly to the concerns of local business interests. By May, his team had arranged its mailing lists by profession, the better to target each group. "Thousands of letters are being sent out continually from Realtors, Insurance Men, Automobile Dealers, Doctors, Dentists and

others" to members of their own professions, Roy Day told his staff. Later, Nixon's men created such paper committees as Ranchers for Nixon and Physicians for Nixon. These bodies, which consisted of a mere handful of supporters, placed ads or sent out letters under their official-sounding names. Kenneth Spencer, a pro-Nixon dentist, warned colleagues about "the increasing threat of socialization," while Ron Stevens told fellow insurance men to back Nixon because "our business success depends upon the continuation of private enterprise."⁴⁴

Nixon's strategy paid off on June 4, when he not only won the Republican primary but fared well against Jerry Voorhis in the combined results of both primaries, in which both candidates had run, as allowed by the state's cross-filing provision. Although Voorhis garnered a majority of the overall primary vote, his total margin was his thinnest since 1936—a fact that heartened Nixon. "Wherever Mr. Nixon has appeared he has made a most favorable impression," Day wrote proudly to the campaign staff. "His sincerity, determination and natural ability as a leader has made a deep niche in the hearts of all those who have been privileged to work with him in this campaign." When Nixon and Pat set off for a vacation in British Columbia to rest up for the fall campaign, they did so knowing he had found a potent message and image for the new era.⁴⁵

By the fall of 1946, the contours of a national Republican revival could be dimly discerned. On the home front, fears about reconversion seemed to be coming true. The lifting of price controls in June, forced on Truman by his Republican opposition, led to the biggest one-month jump in prices in American history. Food shortages intensified—by September the supply of meat was one fifth of its August level—and exacerbated ideological divisions: the left faulted cattlemen for cutting production, while the right, more successfully, pinned blame on the incumbent party's management. Black markets flourished. Labor militancy surged.⁴⁶

As domestic tensions rapidly increased, foreign threats mounted. A bellicose speech by Joseph Stalin in February 1946 was followed by Winston Churchill's admonition in March, given with Truman at his side, that an "iron curtain" now cordoned off Eastern Europe from the free world.

Relations between the former Allies deteriorated. When in September Commerce Secretary Henry Wallace criticized Truman's intransigence toward the Soviet Union, the president fired him, though that did not stop Republicans from coloring Truman and the Democrats as too soft on the Communist threat. In San Francisco on September 30, FBI head J. Edgar Hoover warned that Communists were infiltrating the government and labor unions. The combined weight of these events helped the Republicans frame the upcoming elections as a contest, in party chairman Carroll Reece's phrase, between "communism and Republicanism." GOP congressional hopefuls invoked the Red menace from Massachusetts to Wisconsin to Southern California.⁴⁷

Nixon saw anti-communism, said Committee of 100 member McIntyre Faries, as "a good issue, a gut issue." Nixon was now entering the general election campaign and would be competing head to head against Voorhis for uncommitted voters. Harrison McCall, a Pasadena business owner and GOP activist, had taken the reins as campaign manager, and a modified message, to go with the new boss, was needed for the fall fight. More than in the primaries, anti-communism played, since it was an issue on which Nixon thought Voorhis vulnerable.⁴⁸

Nixon's attacks have long provoked controversy. Critics later charged that he introduced the issue opportunistically. Voorhis, although a former socialist, had long since joined the camp of anti-Communist liberals. He had even served on the House Un-American Activities Committee and sponsored the Voorhis Act, which forced groups with foreign allegiances to register with the government. Nixon's critics also suggested that the Red issue shifted attention from voters' bread-and-butter concerns.⁴⁹

Nixon's intimates believed otherwise. "It wasn't just a political thing with him," Frank Jorgensen insisted, not just a crude, tangential scare tactic. On the contrary, anti-communism grew naturally from the Southlanders' anti-collectivist ideology. Rent control, price controls, the power of organized labor, high taxes, the prospect of a national health care system—these were the harbingers, they believed, of full-blown socialism. If Voorhis was carrying water, even unwittingly, for radical groups, he might undermine the Southlanders' way of life. Anti-communism and opposition to the New Deal, as they saw it, were interlocked. By showing himself

to be tough on communism, Nixon was not changing the topic; he was augmenting his patriotic image.⁵⁰

Nixon had consistently made his own belief in free-market capitalism central to his platform. And in the spring, he and his surrogates had gently begun to invoke the corollary: that Voorhis—the son of a millionaire, schooled at Yale, sympathetic to the unions—had no such priorities. Roy Crocker, a Committee of 100 member and Nixon's campaign chairman, launched the first salvo in April, assailing Voorhis for receiving the endorsement of the "PAC." Most voters took this shorthand phrase to refer to the CIO-PAC, a radical political action committee formed in 1944 by the Congress of Industrial Organizations and its left-wing (but anti-Communist) leader Sidney Hillman. In fact, the group that had endorsed Voorhis was the National Citizens Political Action Committee (NCPAC), a different entity, not tied to labor. Comprising anti-Communist liberals as well as Marxists, NCPAC stressed civil rights for blacks and cooperation with the Soviet Union but hardly toed the Kremlin line. Still, Nixon argued that since some Communists belonged to NCPAC, and since the two PACs shared some board members, "the question of which PAC endorsed him was a distinction without a difference."⁵¹

The anti-communism issue, as Nixon and his supporters saw it, stemmed naturally from his imprecations about New Deal regulations and too-powerful labor unions. They were part of the same overarching ideology. A Nixon campaign memo made this connection clear. Enumerating the campaign's key themes, it included "state socialism versus free enterprise," "a PAC endorsed candidate versus an independent," and "Pro-Russian policy versus American policy," tying together in a neat bundle economics, foreign affairs, and Nixon's self-styled image as an underdog fighting weak-kneed idealists. In speeches that fall, Nixon chided "the people who front for un-American elements . . . by advocating increasing federal controls." He contrasted the philosophy "supported by the radical PAC and its adherents [that] would deprive the people of liberty through regimentation" with his own worldview, which would "return the government to the people under Constitutional guarantee." Far from a diversion, the PAC issue echoed Nixon's other positions such as abolishing the Office of Price Administration ("shot through with

extreme left-wingers . . . boring from within, striving to force private enterprise into bankruptcy") or ending public housing ("a conspiracy among the social housers to discredit private enterprise as represented by the home-building industry"). Other national issues—meat shortages, labor strife, Henry Wallace—buttressed this same message.⁵²

Nixon's aggressive use of the PAC issue also bolstered his patriot image. His tenacity appeared not only legitimate but a heroic response to an emerging crisis. "It was good politics at that time," said Wallace Black, the local attorney and Nixon supporter. "I would describe it as a pretty hard-fought campaign by a young, up-and-coming political leader." Using a line that would become a staple of his rhetoric for years to come, Nixon had pledged a "rocking, socking campaign," and at the candidates' first joint appearance, in September, Nixon had a chance to showcase his hard-hitting style.⁵³

Almost one thousand Californians turned out at the South Pasadena-San Marino Junior High School on September 13, a balmy Friday night. Nixon, having scheduled another event right before, was running late, and inside the auditorium Voorhis mounted the dais alone. Unprepared for verbal fisticuffs, the incumbent rambled over the issues, oblivious to the audience's boredom. Then, just as he finished, Nixon strode from the wings to a roar of applause. Poised and practiced, he briskly recited his well-rehearsed anti-New Deal litany, chiding the federal government for food shortages and attacking the left-wing San Francisco labor leader Harry Bridges for threatening a strike that might imperil the availability of sugar. "The time is at hand in this country when no labor leader or no management leader should have the power to deny the American people any of the necessities of American life," Nixon boomed. His comments elicited the longest cheers he could remember.⁵⁴

With Roy Day having made sure that "we had questions planted in the audience," the PAC issue was certain to arise. As it turned out, a Democrat broached the topic, asking Nixon why he was falsely charging that Voorhis had CIO-PAC support. Perfectly prepared, Nixon pulled from his pocket a copy of NCPAC's endorsement. Confidently, he marched across the stage and handed it to a flustered Voorhis. Voorhis meekly stammered that this was a different group, but the crowd hooted and shouted, while Nixon listed the groups' shared board members. "It's the same thing, virtually,

when they have the same directors," he parried. For the rest of the night, Voorhis fumbled while the audience laughed or booed and Nixon fired off pithy responses. "From then on," recalled Lyle Otterman, a Nixon supporter who worked for Herman Perry, "he proceeded to take Voorhis apart piece by piece, and toss him around the audience."⁵⁵

Otterman considered the debate decisive for Nixon. "He was definitely in the minority when he started his speech," he recalled. ". . . But I could pick up around me the feeling that 'this guy's not so bad after all, is he? He seems to have something on the ball.'" Committee of 100 member Herbert Spencer judged the incumbent "scared and nervous" and the challenger simply "splendid." The enduring impression, wrote the *Los Angeles Times*, was that "Voorhis was at particular pains to clear himself of any implications that he was pro-Russian." Voorhis's camp agreed. "Jerry," said his adviser Chet Holifield, later himself a congressman, "he murdered you."⁵⁶

Nixon ran with the issue. Campaign manager Harrison McCall ordered thousands of plastic thimbles that said: "Nixon for Congress—Put a Needle in the PAC." Advertisements drummed the message home. "A vote for Nixon is a vote against Socialization of free American institutions, . . . the PAC . . . and its communist principles," said one. Another assailed not only the PAC, "its communistic principles and its gigantic slush fund," but also Voorhis himself, claiming that of 46 votes in the past four years, "43 times Voorhis voted the PAC line!" A third claimed that Voorhis voted "to provide luxuries for the minority without a fair return of work at the expense of the hardworking majority of Americans," while depicting Nixon as "the clean-cut, forth-right, patriotic and American candidate for Congress in the 12th district." District newspapers, friendly to Nixon, helped out. Herb Klein's *Alhambra Post-Advocate* speculated coyly on "just why Jerry got the CIO Political Action Committee endorsement" and ran an editorial entitled "How Jerry and Vito Voted," likening Voorhis's record to that of New York's Vito Marcantonio, a far-left New York congressman.* As it turned out, the votes included approval of school lunches, soil conservation, and a ban on poll taxes.⁵⁷

* Nixon would use the same tactic four years later in his Senate race against Helen Gahagan Douglas.

Another debate had been scheduled, but Murray Chotiner, eyeing an advantage, called for still additional contests. Rejecting his advisers' counsel, Voorhis acquiesced to three more exchanges. Across the district, excitement mounted. With television still in its infancy, and politics still relying on retail events, the debates took on the feel of season-ending high school football games, replete with marching bands, fanfare, and crowds of more than a thousand. By the final event, held at the San Gabriel Mission near Los Angeles, the audience was spilling out of the building and the organizers had to set up audio speakers outside so that the latecomers, encamped on the lawn, could hear. If Nixon did not raise the PAC issue at these debates, the audience invariably did; during the question-and-answer periods, Faries recalled, it arose more than any other topic.⁵⁸

Nixon's sharp performances cemented his reputation as a local hero. His forensic skills—"very convincing, very smooth, very glib, very fast," as one admirer said—drew raves. "As far back as I can remember, a political meeting was usually made up of inarticulate speakers who just threw mud around, and you could hardly get a baker's dozen to come," said Gerald Kepple. At the Nixon-Voorhis match-ups, however, "you would have thought that you were back in the days of the Lincoln-Douglas debates. There was no mudslinging; there was just straight-from-the-shoulder debating." Locals began discussing the election as never in recent memory, at lunch counters, taverns, and weekly card games.⁵⁹

Nixon basked in the adulation of strangers. "This is really a fan letter," gushed Sara Morelock of El Monte in one of the many letters Nixon received after the final debate, "for after that magnificent debate last night at San Gabriel I feel I must tell you how proud we in this district are of you." She and others "really beat their hands off in applause for everything you said." Volunteers turned up at Nixon campaign headquarters to help with door-to-door campaigning and stuffing envelopes. "In all the different towns and communities that make up the 12th district," recalled Kepple, "I have never seen such enthusiastic support of people getting out and working as there was in that campaign."⁶⁰

On November 5, Nixon won, with 57 percent of the vote. Across the country, Republicans drove out New Dealers in what the news media heralded as a changing of the guard. The GOP captured both houses of Con-

gress for the first time since 1928, "far beyond its most sanguine hopes," *Time* magazine reported. The Republicans took all six Senate seats that were up for grabs in the populist states of the West and Northwest, which had long voted Democratic. Independent voters, who had also been supporting New Dealers, turned out in significant numbers for the GOP. The main reason, according to *Time*: "The majority of Americans no longer feared to be on their own in free markets."⁶¹

Certainly, Nixon's boosters felt this way. The day after his victory, the leader of the Whittier Chamber of Commerce led a flock of businessmen to Nixon's law office to extend congratulations. The next week, Gerald Kepple, Harrison McCall, and other business leaders fêted the new congressman at a banquet. Congratulatory letters arrived by the hundreds, especially, the campaign noted, from groups like insurance men, realtors, and doctors. "We will no longer be shackled by government controls," exulted one local contractor. "To have the 'New Deal' stranglehold in this area at last broken is like some form of emancipation," echoed another citizen.⁶²

Nixon, exhibiting what Wallace Black called his "uncanny sense of timing," had picked the right moment to run. "Roosevelt's era was fading," Kepple felt. "All of the various government agencies that had been created were having their problems and the government . . . was flailing in the air." Nationally, the Republicans used the slogan "Had Enough?" to play upon what Black called "this swing, following the war, over to the more conservative view. Dick happened to hit it right." Voorhis agreed. Political races, he said, boiled down to battles not between left and right but "between the 'outs' and 'ins'"; Nixon won in California, he said, because he had aligned himself with the people and Voorhis with the federal bureaucracy. The members of California's 12th district who had rallied to Nixon finally felt that they had in Congress a representative who was truly one of them.⁶³

Nixon arrived in Congress in January 1947 to begin what would be six years of service in the House and the Senate, culminating in his election as vice president, at age thirty-nine, in 1952. During this time, he refined the con-

servative populism and all-American image that had endeared him to California voters and made him the Republican Party's brightest young star. What has generally been remembered from these years is Nixon's focus on fighting communism. His role in exposing Alger Hiss as a Soviet spy and his aggressive 1950 Senate race against Helen Gahagan Douglas helped define his persona as a Cold Warrior with a national profile. But although his supporters cheered his vehement anti-communism and praised him as a fighter, his Red-hunting, as in 1946, was just one element of a more fully rounded identity as a heroic American everyman.

Almost as soon as Nixon arrived in the capital as a freshman representative, he found that his populist persona resonated beyond California's 12th district. Just one month into his term, he was standing out among his class. "He looks like the boy who lived down the block from all of us," a reporter for the *Washington Times Herald* gushed; "he's as typically American as Thanksgiving." After he debated a CIO official on a network radio broadcast in March, citizens from around the country wrote to praise his attack on big labor. Nixon distinguished himself, too, with his legislative work. He helped lead the fight for the Taft-Hartley Bill that outlawed the closed shop, and he made headlines back home when he called for a neutral "czar" to arbitrate labor union disputes.⁶⁴

But Nixon's signal issue was anti-communism. Like Voorhis before him, he was given a seat on the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), where he co-authored with South Dakota's Karl Mundt a bill that barred Communist Party members from appointed office and forced them to register with the government. Though the bill didn't pass until two years later, it earned Nixon plaudits.* To Kyle Palmer of the conservative *Los Angeles Times*, a booster since 1946, Nixon had already proved himself "one of the ablest and most fearless of the younger generation in Congress." The U.S. Junior Chamber of Commerce named the new legislator one of the nation's "ten most outstanding young men."⁶³

Nixon's greatest fame accrued from his role in the most celebrated espionage case that came before HUAC: the case of Alger Hiss. In August 1948, Whittaker Chambers, a stout, rumped, wild-eyed editor at *Time*, tes-

* Later reintroduced and renamed for Nevada senator Pat McCarran, it became law in 1950.

tified that Hiss, a courtly, blue-blooded ex-State Department official with a seemingly impeccable reputation, had been a Soviet agent. Nixon seized the issue. He brought Hiss before the committee for interrogation, eventually helping to land him in prison for perjury. Nixon and his supporters saw the Hiss case in populist terms, with the liberal diplomat representing the corrupt elite and Nixon (and Chambers) embodying the virtuous common folk. Although Nixon later recalled that he had little support during the Hiss case, in fact his aggressiveness throughout the affair impressed Americans as proof of the pure, patriotic spirit of his pursuit. Chambers himself recalled that to his children Nixon was known as " 'Nixie,' the kind and the good, about whom they will tolerate no nonsense." Intending to underscore Nixon's noble motives, Chambers added: "I have a vivid picture of him, the blackest hour of the Hiss case, standing by the barn [on Chambers's farm] and saying in his quietly savage way (he is the kindest of men): 'If the American people understood the real character of Alger Hiss, they would boil him in oil.'"⁶⁶

The Hiss case crystallized Nixon's image as a crusader against Communists. In October 1948, he barnstormed the West and Middle West, refining his speeches about "Cold War treason and other communist dangers." One advertisement, designed with all the subtlety of a cover from the era's potboiler paperbacks, proclaimed Nixon, in screaming letters, "AMERICA'S GREATEST ENEMY OF COMMUNISM." Setting Nixon's earnest visage starkly against a black background, it luridly exhorted locals in bold paintbrushlike strokes to come hear "THE INSIDE FACTS ON THE RED THREAT! TOO HOT TO PUBLISH! TOO INFLAMMATORY TO BROADCAST!" Back in California's 12th district, the South Pasadena Republican Club passed resolutions honoring their hometown hero, part of a continuing chorus of huzzahs.⁶⁷

Riding high, precocious as ever, Nixon set his sights on the Senate, capitalizing on his reputation as a champion of ordinary folks. His opponent, Representative Helen Gahagan Douglas—a Barnard-educated actress, ardent New Dealer, and friend of Eleanor Roosevelt—made a perfect foil. Nixon picked up an attack that had been used against her in the primary, comparing her votes to those of Vito Marcantonio (as Nixon's supporters had done to Voorhis's in 1946). He juxtaposed the two repre-

sentatives' records on a pastel flyer that became known as the "Pink Sheet." Many liberals were outraged by this tactic; thereafter they fumed about Nixon's too-ready use of the communism issue and pronounced him a cheap-shot artist nonpareil. But, again, as important as Nixon's barbs against "the Pink Lady" was his rendering of Douglas as an elitist, a captive to Eastern interests, and a feminist career woman. In contrast, Nixon styled himself the family man who shared Californians' kitchen-table concerns. He toured the state in a ramshackle, wood-paneled station wagon, with Pat or his daughters in tow. His background, wrote Carl Greenberg of the *Los Angeles Examiner*, was "so average American that, unless you found it out for yourself, it would smack of a campaign manager's imagination." Throughout these years, newspapers adoringly profiled Nixon (the "tall, dark and—yes—handsome freshman"), while glossy middlebrow magazines displayed photographs of the Nixon family sitting together in their cheerful living room or on their idyllic front lawn. "He lives modestly [and] avoids the flamboyant side of Washington social life," ran a typically rapturous piece in the *Saturday Evening Post*. California's voters ratified their belief in this image of Nixon in the 1950 election, giving him 59 percent of their 3.7 million votes and a seat in the U.S. Senate.⁶⁸

Within a year, he became the Republican Party's most sought after speaker and the vessel for hopes of a conservative revival. "He was dark and erect, a still youthful Navy veteran of World War II," recalled the Pulitzer Prize-winning biographer Margaret L. Coit upon seeing Nixon in Worcester, Massachusetts, in 1952. "He gave a wonderful speech. It was exciting; it got us all enthused. I couldn't put it out of my mind. I still remember it as one of the best speeches I ever heard." Others compared him to Jack Armstrong, the "All-American boy" of radio and children's books. In the Southland particularly, a new generation of activists coalesced around Nixon and his message. Pat Hillings, Nixon's aide and successor in Congress, called it "a bona fide Republican movement." "We belonged to the new postwar crop; many of us were converted Democrats, moving into the Republican ranks," Hillings said. "Nixon became in those days the champion of this younger group, and as a result, we were able to build around him a very active political organization."⁶⁹

Among those excited by this new star was General Dwight Eisenhower, the favorite for the 1952 Republican presidential nomination. Eisenhower had met Nixon twice before and admired his air of integrity and statesmanship. Ike saw Nixon's behavior in the Hiss case not as vicious or crude but as an actual asset. "The feature that especially appealed to me," the general wrote in his memoirs, "was the reputation that Congressman Nixon had achieved for fairness in the investigating process. Not once had he overstepped the limits prescribed by the American sense of fair play or American rules applying to such investigations. He did not persecute or defame. This I greatly admired." At the Republican Convention in Chicago in July 1952, Eisenhower chose Nixon as his running mate, hoping the vigorous, youthful Californian would complement the older general's staid persona.⁷⁰

Nixon's selection sent his hometown crowd into raptures. "Your nomination . . . created such a high pitch of excitement in the Gibbons household," Committee of 100 member Boyd Gibbons wrote, "that we really haven't calmed down as yet." Like a proud parent, Gibbons waxed rhapsodic about Nixon's "fresh, clean, 'young American' personality" and his "'Lincolnish' qualities and . . . deep convictions and the need for such a man 'someday,' to be at the helm of this great country." No less adoring was the national press. *U.S. News* lauded Nixon as "the fighting member of the Republican team," blessed with "youthful stamina" and "skill as a debater." Magazine profiles cheered the "5-foot, 11½-inch Californian with his curly dark hair and his flashing white smile" and his "brown-eyed blonde" wife. "The average Nixon day begins soon after sunup," went one piece. "Pat dresses the children and feeds them first. At around seven o'clock Nixon comes down for his breakfast and before eight o'clock he has kissed his womenfolk and gone to his office . . . often until 11 o'clock at night." The controversy Nixon had generated in the past—in the Hiss case and the Voorhis and Douglas races—was buried under the avalanche of adulation.⁷¹

Then came the Checkers speech. Years later, it would be remembered by his critics as the ultimate expression of his phoniness, as the moment that

turned many of them into lifelong Nixon-haters on the spot. In Emile de Antonio's documentary *Millhouse: A White Comedy* (1971), made by and for left liberals, long stretches of the Checkers speech are excerpted in toto and played deadpan, for laughs. Antonio assumed that Nixon's theatrics, which seemed primitive in hindsight to a hip 1970s filmgoer, would strike his audience as patently comical. Antonio wasn't wrong—audiences roared at Nixon's earnest delivery—but in going for cheap laughs, he forsook historical understanding.

Only by clearing away the various images of Nixon that have developed over the years is it possible to understand how most Americans saw the speech: as the quintessential expression of Nixon's populist image. To the large majority of those who watched or heard it in 1952, it demonstrated Nixon's affinity for ordinary, middle-class families, his capacity for straightforward talk, his authenticity. If it was the spark that ignited the wildfire of Nixon-hating, it was also the capstone of Nixon's populist self-presentation.

The trouble for the vice-presidential aspirant began on September 18, when the *New York Post* reported the existence of a private fund, totaling some \$18,000, that Nixon's Southland backers had raised to cover his expenses. The news, reeking of favor-trading, sent the news media into a frenzy and jeopardized Nixon's place on the Republican ticket. Leading Eastern Republicans, including the influential *New York Herald Tribune* and (privately) many of Eisenhower's closest advisers, joined Democrats in calling for him to resign from the ticket. As Ike pondered changing running mates, Nixon prevailed on the general to let him defend himself before a national television and radio audience. On Tuesday night, September 23, Nixon spoke from the El Capitan Theater, converted by NBC into a television studio, to the largest audience any politician had ever enjoyed.

His words did more than dispel doubts about the fund. They painted, in the most vivid colors he had yet found in his rhetorical palette, a portrait of himself as an American everyman. Only the first portion of the speech addressed questions about the fund. The balance was straight autobiography: a sepia-toned recounting of the trials of a self-made man, adorned with emotional touches to make Nixon's plight feel familiar.

Nixon recalled the "modest circumstances" of his boyhood, in which his entire family toiled in his father's grocery store to make ends meet, and, later, the "rather difficult time" he and Pat had faced, "like so many of the young couples who may be listening to us." He mentioned, too, as he had so often in 1946, his war service. "I got a couple of letters of commendation," he said, "but I was there when the bombs were falling." Then came the 1946 campaign, into which he had sunk his savings. He lived a frugal lifestyle like most middle-class Americans. "It isn't very much but Pat and I have the satisfaction that every dime we've got is honestly ours." Alluding to the Truman administration scandals in which furs had been given as bribes, he added: "I should say this, that Pat doesn't have a mink coat. But she does have a respectable cloth coat. And I always tell her she'd look good in anything." As a crowning touch, he invoked his daughters and a gift they'd been given, "a little cocker spaniel dog . . . black-and-white spotted. And our little girl, Tricia, the six-year-old, named it Checkers. And the kids love the dog and . . . regardless of what they say about it, we're gonna keep it."

Nixon had instructed viewers to telegram the Republican National Committee to vote on whether he should stay on, and they supported him overwhelmingly. "The telephone is lit up like a Christmas tree," Ted Rogers, Nixon's television consultant, crowed. Millions of letters and telegrams poured in—to Nixon, to Eisenhower, to the RNC, to NBC, to countless news outlets. Heavily pro-Nixon, they expressed admiration that he had courageously bared his soul, and his finances, before the public; they praised him as honest, sincere, humble. Young couples professed to have faced the exact same hardships. Republicans who had been thinking about defecting, as well as self-described lifelong Democrats, claimed that Nixon had won them over. The most important endorsement came on a West Virginia airstrip. Greeting Nixon in the cool night, a beaming Eisenhower assured his number two, "You're my boy!"⁷²

Like a good politician, Eisenhower was simply heeding the popular will. Nixon had turned himself into a national hero. In particular, the mail from his home state—six hundred letters from Whittier alone—dripped with pride. "We were overwhelmed by the sincerity of your speech last night," wrote Jeanne Wells of Artesia, California, who mailed a letter

because the telegraph offices were backed up for more than an hour. "Your honesty and sincerity are unquestionable," echoed Bill Hanna of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Productions on stationery decorated with Tom-and-Jerry cartoons. "Count my Democratic vote for 'Ike and Dick.'" Banged out on rickety typewriters or scrawled in longhand, stated in one-sentence slogans or argued in minor treatises, jotted on flowered notecards or authored jointly by like-minded office workers on official stationery—whatever the form, reams of letters extolled Nixon's television performance. One young Southern Californian, a moderate conservative, stood outside the TV studio the night of the speech and then volunteered to work in the campaign. It would be another four years, however, before Bob Haldeman joined Nixon's team. (He went into advertising first.)⁷³

The applause came from beyond California, too. Editorial pages and commentators weighed in with accolades on behalf of small-town Americans everywhere. More than thirty years later, a Texas-born writer named Lawrence Wright recalled Nixon's populist image for a culture that had all but forgotten it. Wright remembered that his father, a local bank vice president in Abilene, "had no real idea who Nixon was" until the speech. Watching it, he wrote, "was an arresting moment in my father's life"; afterward, "Daddy was a Nixon man." For millions of God- and country-loving people like his parents, Wright argued, who came from poverty and were rising into middle-class life during the postwar years, Nixon "began to personify certain attitudes they endorsed . . . yearning for dignity and status. . . . Nixon became their angry representative, their score-settler."⁷⁴ Six weeks after the speech, Eisenhower and Nixon reclaimed the White House for the GOP, championing a conservatism that embraced not only business growth and anti-communism but also a resentment of liberal elites.

In *Nixon Agonistes*, the writer Garry Wills called the Checkers speech Nixon's classic attempt to assert that "He is just like all the rest of us, only more so." Like others for whom the speech inspired venom or ridicule, Wills judged the attempt a failure. He had caught glimpses, he said, of "the private Nixon," a man "who thinks of himself as a Wilsonian intellectual," suggesting that the common-man adornments amounted to

phony image making; Nixon, he said, was the "least authentic man alive."⁷⁵ Wills in effect posited a "real" Nixon behind this mask. The suggestion was understandable. From Wills's vantage point in 1969, it was hard to make out, through the layers of interpretation that had accrued over the years, Nixon's original everyman persona. But in 1952, that Horatio Alger rendering from the Voorhis race and the Checkers speech resonated with millions who hadn't yet learned to view their politics with Wills's sardonic detachment.

Just how much truth existed in this image of Nixon matters less, finally, than the credence it demonstrably enjoyed. Nixon's successful self-presentation launched his career and made him a leader of the Republican Party for twenty years. It inspired a generation of activists like Pat Hillings and Bob Haldeman, who saw dividends in forging a conservative populism to appeal beyond the GOP's well-to-do base. And the success of Nixon's everyman image ushered in a new candidate-centered politics, in which old dichotomies between image and reality would cease to have anything like the purchase they had in earlier times.

The Fifties Liberals: Nixon as Tricky Dick

The Fifties were not the Eisenhower years but the Nixon years. That was the decade when the American lower middle class in the person of this man moved to engrave into the history of the United States, as the voice of America, its own faltering spirit, its self-pity and its envy, its continual anxiety about what the wrong people might think, its whole peevish, resentful whine.

—Murray Kempton, *America Comes of Middle Age*¹

“He has, probably, more enemies than any other American,” the *Saturday Evening Post*’s Stewart Alsop wrote of Richard Nixon in 1958. Nixon had fairly earned, Alsop explained, through his combativeness and unctuous style, the spite of Democrats everywhere. But, he added, “Sometimes the dislike of Nixon is pure bile, undiluted by rational content, as in the case of the elderly lady in Whittier, Nixon’s hometown in California, who telephoned this reporter to say, ‘I know it’s against religion to hate anybody, but I just can’t help hating that Nixon.’”²

It may not need proving that Richard Nixon was the most despised American politician of his time. But the testaments of his adversaries support Alsop’s idea that in the 1950s a new and distinct phenomenon called Nixon-hating emerged. With liberal Democrats blazing the way, many

Americans came to regard Nixon as a singularly dark and dangerous presence in national life. And while the hatred had an ideological component, there was far more to it. Nixon’s detractors viewed him as categorically different from other partisan foes. “All the time I’ve been in politics,” Harry Truman told his biographer, “there’s only two people I hate, and he’s one.” Adlai Stevenson said Nixon was the sole public figure he ever “really loathed” and once, upon hearing Nixon’s name at a party, exclaimed, “Please! Not while I’m eating!” Eleanor Roosevelt, a biographer wrote, considered Nixon “the politician she most detested.” Dean Acheson thought just two or three others as odious. Averell Harriman once stalked out of a swanky Georgetown dinner party—the kind where Democrats, Republicans, and reporters normally mixed with ease—because he spied Nixon sitting nearby. “I will not break bread with that man!” the diplomat boomed before exiting. And John F. Kennedy, speaking to *The New Yorker*’s Washington correspondent Richard Rovere, called his 1960 presidential opponent a “son of a bitch” and a “bastard.”³

Nixon-hating wasn’t confined to politicians. In the pages of the nation’s liberal newspapers and magazines, intellectual journalists—Murray Kempton, Max Lerner, and William Shannon of the *New York Post*, William Lee Miller and Meg Greenfield of *The Reporter*, others at *The Nation*, *The New Republic*, and *The Progressive*—dissected with numbing frequency the peculiar nature of Nixon’s odiousness. “A ruthless partisan,” said columnist Walter Lippmann. “The West’s streamlined McCarthy,” said historian Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. “If he did wrestle with his conscience,” japed *New Republic* contributor William Costello, “the match was fixed.” These barbs brought nods and echoes from their readers—intellectuals, academics, and other well-educated members of the arts and professions who voted Democratic and joined groups like Americans for Democratic Action and the American Civil Liberties Union. These writers and readers were known as the “eggheads,” a term coined by Stewart Alsop and his brother Joe. Nixon hated the eggheads, along with the press and the “Eastern establishment” generally, for their influence and social grace. They returned the sentiment in spades. In the 1950s they collectively forged a new picture of Nixon that would soon join, and later supersede, the populist image that he had previously enjoyed.⁴

If one has to strain, after fifty years, to retrieve the portrait of Nixon as Horatio Alger, picturing the malevolent Nixon takes little work. Vividly rendered in the cartoons of *The Washington Post's* "Herblock," summed up in the nickname affixed to Nixon during his 1950 race for the Senate—"Tricky Dick"—the notion of Nixon as America's consummate political villain lasted through his vice presidency, his presidency, his post-presidency, and into the present. "Like more than a few Americans of my generation," wrote Frank Rich of *The New York Times* in 1994, a baby boomer, "I learned to despise Richard Nixon around the time I learned to recite the Pledge of Allegiance." Whether in the fiction of Robert Coover (whose *Public Burning* depicts the young Nixon arranging to immolate the Rosenbergs in Times Square) or offhand references from Woody Allen (whose film *Sleeper* gibes that when Nixon left the White House, the Secret Service would count the silverware), this dastardly Nixon has thrived. For all the images of Nixon that have come along since, Tricky Dick remains indelible and ubiquitous in American culture. As William F. Buckley, Jr., wrote after Watergate, "The enemies of Richard Nixon have totally succeeded in their mission of making Nixon the most despised figure in America." Nixon, he added, "turned out to be [their] principal accomplice."⁵

Demonic portraits of Nixon proliferated during his presidency, but they took root in American culture as early as the 1950s. The liberals' dark view of Nixon suffused descriptions of even his physical appearance. In the 1940s and early 1950s, Nixon's admirers had described the young politician as fresh-faced, boyish-looking, clean-cut, handsome. But beauty lay with the beholder: Nixon's foes noted only his dour demeanor, as if it provided a window onto his soul. "He had," said Sam Rayburn, the Democratic Speaker of the House in the 1950s, "the meanest face I've ever seen." The thick curls of black hair, the bushy eyebrows, and the five-o'clock shadow enveloped Nixon in an aura of gloom. He scowled and frowned, prematurely creasing his forehead and cheeks. Few profiles of him failed to note his "ski-jump" nose, which poked out, Pinocchio-like. His eyes, beady and dark, darted as he spoke, adding to the air of suspicion; "shifty eyed," Truman called him. The heavy jowls, which grew more pronounced as he aged, made him seem, Kempton wrote, as though

"a great wad of unmelting butter [was] stuffed next to his lower jawbone." Liberals just didn't like the looks of him.⁶

The unflattering descriptions of Nixon's appearance only begged the question of what, besides his perpetual stubble, gave rise to this deep animus in the first place. "Why," as *The Reporter's* William Lee Miller asked searchingly, "is there such a widespread distaste for Nixon?"⁷ Starting with his advent as a national figure in 1952, liberals expended much thought and energy trying to articulate the answers. At first they resorted to the stand-by categories in which they had placed political enemies before: He was a right-winger, they said, a shill for business, a demagogue, an anti-Semite. But in the course of the Fifties, they honed their analyses, trying to do justice to Nixon's complicated nature.

The new picture was a photographic negative of the conservatives' all-American hero. What Southern Californians saw as fighting spirit, the eggheads saw as below-the-belt viciousness. The patriotic anti-communism admired by conservatives struck liberals as cynical Red-baiting. The everyman stylings were seen as phony populism. Nixon, liberals concluded, was not a right-wing ideologue but an opportunist who exploited the new tools of television, advertising, and public relations to project a false image. He remained popular, they argued, by hoodwinking middle-class voters with these black arts. Nixon posed a threat to democracy itself.

The image of Tricky Dick would haunt Nixon his whole life. Although Fifties liberals were its main creators and proponents, it informed the views of Nixon held by other constituencies as well. It lay at the core of the hatred toward him that made his presidency an ordeal for both Nixon and the country. Without it, perhaps, Nixon might have weathered the crises that forced him in August 1974 to resign.

But the popularity of this image in intellectual circles also revealed the liberals' own prejudices and constraints. In demonizing Nixon for his appeals to the middle class, the liberals acknowledged their own growing distance from, and even scorn for, those Americans like the Texas journalist's parents who saw Nixon as their earnestly striving spokesman. At times the liberals wondered whether Nixon might indeed speak for ordinary citizens, whether they might be the ones who were out of touch.

Their diatribes against Nixon as a manipulator of the masses showed a lack of trust in the people's judgment, a retreat from their once adamant faith in democracy's health. Propounding this portrait of Tricky Dick marked a step toward an elitist politics that would eventually leave their own reputations damaged, in many people's eyes, almost as much as that of the man they loved to hate.

Nixon came to fame at a moment of uncertainty for liberals. On the one hand, they were enjoying new prestige in a "postindustrial" society that valued intellectual expertise as never before. This sense of security helped them retain faith in American democracy as an authentic, well-functioning system. Rejoicing in the victory over fascism, confident that skilled management of the economy and an active program of social relief and civil rights safeguards could counter capitalism's injustices, they expected the country could finally deliver on its promises of equality and justice. But Truman's Fair Deal fell victim to newly powerful congressional Republicans, the South blocked civil rights legislation, and liberals had to take comfort in preserving what remained of the New Deal. When the Republicans nominated Eisenhower for president in 1952, many liberals resigned themselves to a Republican ascent, realizing that the general's benign demeanor would appeal to Americans content with the postwar equilibrium.⁸

Complicating matters, the Red Scare placed liberals in a bind. They struggled to walk the vanishing line between fighting communism and defending civil liberties. Liberals supported a foreign policy of containing Soviet expansion but also understood that the anti-Communist mania sweeping the country represented anti-New Dealism by other means. Nixon and other politicians were winning headlines—and elections—by charging their liberal opponents with socialist leanings or naïveté in the face of Soviet designs. Amid blacklists and witch-hunts, upholding an inflexible anti-Communist stance was hard to reconcile with a commitment to civil liberties. Liberals tried to make sure that anti-Communist strictures operated within procedural safeguards, and they tried to contrast their own positions with those of Nixon, Joe McCarthy, and the Red-

baiters. But in the decade's early years, at least, liberals were clearly losing the fight, as even a moderate position was likely to bring on accusations of being "soft on communism."

The Red Scare's irony was that American capitalism was actually in great shape. Despite early fears, the economy had in fact adjusted to peacetime superbly. Truman's Keynesian policies of fine-tuning the economy kept production high and unemployment low. A GI Bill granted a college education to returning veterans, many of whom took steady jobs with blue-chip corporations. Scientists and engineers perfected new technologies that showered consumers with a cornucopia of goods. In automatic-transmission Chevrolets, along newly paved ribbons of highway, families migrated to prefabricated suburbs, where in their split-level houses they enjoyed the fruits of American ingenuity. Conformity and alienation became the new perils of modern, mass society. In *The Lonely Crowd*, the Harvard sociologist David Riesman contended that Americans in the 1950s were becoming "other-directed," slavishly emulating the behavior and tastes of their peers. In *The Organization Man* (1956), William H. Whyte bemoaned an ethos of managerial harmony and conflict-averse teamwork that was supplanting an earlier era's do-it-yourself entrepreneurialism.

Technology, especially, brought discontents. One of the most popular inventions, the television, also generated a special set of concerns. In 1948, there were 172,000 TV sets in the United States; by 1952, there were 15.3 million, in one third of all homes. Thrilling as entertainment, television united the country as neither radio nor magazines had; a powerful marketing tool, it brought sales pitches for Colgate toothpaste and Campbell's soup into living rooms. But many intellectuals scoffed: TV, they warned, degraded the culture by targeting mass tastes and, through its advertising, nourished the era's materialism. The Democrats' standard-bearer Adlai Stevenson claimed he never watched it and during his 1952 campaign refused to run TV ads because he felt that to hawk candidates like "Ivory Soap versus Palmolive" insulted people's intelligence.

Television, which used staging, lighting, and camera tricks to create illusions, fed concerns about propaganda and manipulation. So too did the developing fields of advertising and public relations, which used mar-

ket research and psychological tricks to drum up enthusiasm for a company's products. In *The Hidden Persuaders* (1957), a best-seller, the journalist Vance Packard, with the mischievous glee of a magician divulging his secrets, described how ad men used "motivation research" to get people to buy goods whether they wanted them or not. Advertising, already ubiquitous on billboards and buses and in glossy magazines, now also penetrated the political arena. The methods of Leone Baxter and Clem Whitaker, the California politicians who had transformed that state's elections with their statistically sophisticated opinion polls and cutting-edge PR, came to influence national candidates and elections as well.⁹

Liberals developed a deep ambivalence toward the public that readily fell prey to these tricks. In the 1930s, when they were part of a broad left-liberal coalition that supported a program of social change, most liberals professed faith in the people's commonsense judgment. But the horror of Nazism and the Holocaust, and their echoes in the Red Scare, fueled a fear of the mob and a distrust of ordinary people's capacity for rationality in the face of propaganda and demagoguery, especially when they were yoked to technology and the mass media. "The unhappy truth is that the prevailing public opinion has been destructively wrong at the critical junctures," Walter Lippmann wrote. "Mass opinion . . . has shown itself to be a dangerous master of decisions when the stakes are life and death." Having discovered the power of the irrational, intellectuals now saw the populace, in the economist Joseph Schumpeter's phrase, as "an indeterminate bundle of vague impulses playing about given slogans and mistaken impressions." Even more than in politics, liberals set themselves apart from their countrymen in the cultural sphere, where they prized humanistic education, artistic sophistication, and a cosmopolitan outlook. Critics such as Lionel Trilling extolled the virtues of complexity, sophistication, ambiguity; they deplored, with Dwight Macdonald, the "midcult" vulgarization of standards enabled by the mass production of culture. Together, these strains of political and cultural elitism led liberals to believe that America's problems would be best solved if tackled by people like themselves.¹⁰

Liberals found a hero in Stevenson, the eloquent governor of Illinois and the Democrats' presidential nominee in 1952 and 1956. Stevenson

seemed the rare political creature who was above politics, who could elevate the whole messy business to a higher plane. Though he was, on the issues, more conservative than Truman, he struck intellectuals as one of their own—"so charming and cultivated, so witty and so . . . well, *somewhat* weary," the critic Irving Howe provocatively wrote, and so well suited "to represent and speak for them." In their letters, Stevenson's supporters called for a politics of "faith, not fear," for "forward-looking speeches," for someone to tell "the whole truth." The candidate responded with a vision of a refined, upright America in which light and reason would be restored to politics and "freedom . . . made real for all without regard to race or belief or economic condition."¹¹

No one posed a greater threat to this vision, in the liberal intellectual view, than the menacing figure of Richard Nixon. In an era when analysts decried the "personalization" of politics, Nixon seemed hateful not just as a politician but as a person. His most obvious failings, liberals felt, were but "surface indications," as August Hecksher wrote, of intrinsic flaws in his character.¹² His hard-hitting and cagey rhetorical style combined with his lack of grace to create a man who seemed false and dishonest to his core. The liberals' Nixon was a mirror image of the conservatives' Nixon: not an authentic hero of the postwar age but a paradigmatically inauthentic man for anomic modern times.

More than other leading Republicans such as Senator Robert Taft or House Speaker Joe Martin, Nixon was perceived as nasty, aggressive, and heedless of normal restraints. What supporters admired as mettle, enemies saw as ruthlessness—a trait that always remained the first count in the liberals' bill of indictment against Nixon. "Certain charges are not made," wrote *The New Republic's* Richard Strout, in his "TRB" column; "there are unwritten rules in the great game of politics. But the lethal young Nixon does not accept these rules. He is out for the kill and the scalp at any cost." Contrary to later lore, few liberals pointed out Nixon's virulence during his 1946 race against Voorhis, which went mostly unnoticed outside California (although after 1952, liberals retrospectively found in that race proof

of Nixon's viciousness).^{*} Nor was the charge heard much during the Hiss case (when, contrary to Nixon's later recollections, many liberals and journalists had sided with him).[†] Rather it was amid his high-profile 1950 Senate race against Helen Gahagan Douglas that liberals gave Nixon his hostile makeover. The brainy, glamorous Douglas was just the sort of liberal Nixon loved to attack. Reporters covering the campaign relayed tales of Nixon's street fighting that became notorious in liberal circles: not only the "Pink Sheet" that compared her to the Communist congressman Vito Marcantonio, but other dirty tricks as well; flyers appeared, for example, boasting fake endorsements of Douglas from the "Communist League of Negro Women." The Nixon who struck much of California's petit bourgeoisie as a family man and fighting patriot appeared to liberals as a deft master, as *The Nation's* Carey McWilliams wrote, of "petty malice" and "brazen demagoguery." The veteran muckraker Drew Pearson called Nixon's 1950 operation "one of the most skillful and cut-throat campaigns . . . I have ever seen." At the root of this viciousness was Nixon's character, many critics asserted. "He is hard and inflexible," wrote William Costello of the Mutual Broadcast System, Nixon's first critical biographer, "with few of the saving graces of tenderness, humor, generosity toward the fallen."¹³

Even when Nixon muted his vituperative style after 1954, liberals found other traits to despise or scorn: a crippling social awkwardness, a lack of ease and grace, an overweening earnestness. Sometimes these complaints

^{*} Voorhis was among the few who castigated Nixon soon after the 1946 race both for what he considered Nixon's distortions of the PAC issue and for advertisements that painted the Democrat as "subversive" and "pro-Russian." Voorhis alleged in 1947 that Nixon's minions had bullied shopkeepers, workers, and newspaper editors into suppressing their support for him. "Merchants were warned that if they dared to sign newspaper statements in my support, as they had done in previous campaigns, their line of credit would be cut off at the bank. One large banking institution sent the word 'down the line' that its employees were not to vote for Jerry Voorhis." The sole editor in the district who had previously supported him, Voorhis added, "was informed the next morning by his landlord that he had read the editorial and the editor would have to 'get out.'" Yet for all the alleged foul play, Voorhis said he bore no grudge against Nixon. He wrote Nixon a friendly note afterward, and the two met and "parted . . . as personal friends."

[†] Typifying the liberal attitude, William V. Shannon wrote of Nixon in 1955: "The prestige of his participation in the unmasking of Alger Hiss for example is untarnished and not in dispute, but he cannot live on that forever." Nixon scarcely appears in books about the Hiss case written before he became vice president.

seemed like little more than intellectual snobbery. In the *New York Post*, William Shannon wrote that Nixon lacked "skepticism, detachment, humor, irony, tolerance—qualities generally considered hallmarks of a civilized mind." Richard Rovere said he had "no gift for bonhomie." Seeing Nixon at a party, Stewart Alsop's wife, Patricia, compared him to a high school hall monitor, "wooden and stiff . . . terribly difficult to talk to," and "a terrible dancer" to boot. These descriptions made Nixon sound like an unappealing guest but hardly a menace to the republic. Indeed, a *New Republic* reader complained that the magazine's attacks on Nixon "smack of personal prejudice or snobbism," adding: "We may not like his ungentlemanly tactics, nor his shallow-seeming background. He is not the sort of man one would care to ask for dinner. But we have nothing that adds up to a real case."¹⁴

Yet beneath the hauteur, liberals did have a legitimate and complicated critique of Nixon's style. Nixon's strained efforts to appear reasonable, they felt, were not just coarse but baleful. His studied air of thoughtfulness may have played in the Rotary clubs, but to media-wise liberals it was condescending and insulting and cheapened political debate. Then, too, his innate uptightness, worse than a social failing, indicated an underlying deceptiveness; whenever he tried to project casualness or candor, he seemed only to be donning a false front. "It is the style of Nixon," wrote Evelyn Houston, "or to be more painfully exact, the lack of one—that pervasive and alchemic falsity . . . a veritable Midas touch for making ersatz of the real—that has made many of us wince."¹⁵

When Nixon told a reporter that "a good off-the-cuff informal speech takes more preparation than a speech you read" or otherwise admitted that he worked at molding his public profile, liberals seized on the remarks as proof that his common-man portrait was a facade. Arthur Schlesinger Jr. mocked the spate of stories in which Nixon claimed he liked hamburger or didn't like champagne—clumsy bids to make himself seem average; he joked about one newspaper headline that read: "Nixon's Aim: To Portray Himself as a Regular Guy." To liberals, Nixon's image crafting always backfired: the spontaneity invariably seemed planned, the naturalness artificial. If sincerity is everything, and being able to fake it means you've got it made, then Nixon's problem was that he couldn't.¹⁶

To liberals, Nixon wasn't just unrefined. He was deliberately, danger-

ously deceptive. "Since nothing about him is spontaneous," wrote Murray Kempton, "it is somehow impossible to forgive him that smallest transgression, because he knows exactly what he is doing." Behind his mask of fair-mindedness, liberals saw a deft practitioner of "innuendo, half-truths, and downright distortion"—even, some claimed, alluding to the Nazi propagandists, "the Big Lie." Nixon could dodge a question expertly and level accusations so carefully that he could later deny that he had spoken ill of anyone. In 1952, for instance, he labeled Truman, Dean Acheson, and Adlai Stevenson "traitors to the high principles in which many of the nation's Democrats believe"—and then innocently insisted he could not understand the outcry since he had never charged anyone with treason.¹⁷

Cataloguing and exposing these ruses with Aristotelian precision became a favorite liberal pastime. The best minds of their generation devoted their analytical prowess to explaining, in an endless procession of articles throughout the 1950s, the maddening success of Nixon's political and rhetorical style. In one of the more famous of these efforts, Meg Greenfield parsed "The Prose of Richard M. Nixon" in *The Reporter*, identifying such devices as "The Straw Men," "The Slippery Would-Have-Been," and "The Short Bridge from (a) to (b)" (professing, in a single sentence, to believe both a statement and its opposite).¹⁸ These exegeses sought to prove, if only to the converted, that Nixon was fooling the public with his sly rhetoric and self-presentations. And while liberals howled when he did it, they congratulated themselves when they caught him, suggesting their own sense of superiority to the public they believed was so easily fooled.

None of Nixon's critics had articulated such a fine analysis when he mounted the podium in Chicago in July 1952 to accept his party's nomination as vice president. The Hiss case and Douglas race notwithstanding, on a national level Nixon's image remained relatively uncontested. The press praised his selection as likely to help Eisenhower's already good chances, and even the liberals at first said little. They too were still getting to know him. "Who Is Richard Nixon?" was the headline of pieces in *The Reporter* and *The New Republic*. A profile in *The Progressive* had hardly a mean word for Nixon; it dispassionately described his "routine Republican voting

record" and depicted "the clean-cut, flashing-eyed, dark-haired Nixon" in language reminiscent of the flattering profiles of the *Saturday Evening Post*.¹⁹

For those nursing grudges from the 1950 Senate race, however, Nixon fast became a lightning rod. Lacking a deep familiarity with this relative newcomer to the scene—Nixon was all of thirty-nine—they drew reflexively on familiar types that they associated with their worst enemies: right-wing thug, demagogue, bigot, crook. Eventually, liberals formed more complicated pictures of Nixon, but these stock personae provided a starting point.

What liberals knew best about Nixon was his strident anti-communism and his hardball campaigning. Accordingly, they lumped him with such angry ultraconservative Senate colleagues as John Bricker, William Jenner, Kenneth Wherry, and Joe McCarthy. These Old Guard stalwarts, unreconciled to the New Deal even into the 1950s, were known for their unceasing crusade against all federal programs. Liberals, scrambling to size up Nixon's brief career in July 1952, latched onto how neatly his record matched his right-wing peers': votes to cut income taxes, to enact the anti-labor Taft-Hartley Act, to reduce public housing, to block the expansion of Social Security. What Nixon's conservative boosters saw as devotion to capitalist principles struck liberals as the sort of reactionary thinking the nation had supposedly left behind with Herbert Hoover. The pugilistic rhetoric and tactics that Nixon used against Douglas also reminded liberals of the Old Guard's intemperate language and Red-baiting. A Stevenson campaign poster portrayed Nixon as part of a cabal of right-wing extremists. The sketch, entitled "Watch out for the Man on a White Horse!", showed a clueless Eisenhower atop a Trojan horse, while McCarthy, Jenner, and Taft scurried inside the belly and Nixon grabbed the reins.²⁰

A second image styled Nixon an old school anti-Semite in the manner of Gerald L. K. Smith, Huey Long's more intemperate associate, or Father Charles Coughlin, the demagogic radio broadcaster.* Fifties liberals,

* Decades later, the image of Nixon as an anti-Semite would reappear after the release of some of his White House tapes. As the National Archives released tapes and White House memos over the years, evidence of Nixon's anti-Jewish slurs and actions mounted. In one case, Nixon ordered his aide Fred Malek literally to count the Jews who were employed by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, which he believed was rigging unemployment data to make him look bad. The news of the count forced Malek to resign his position in George Bush's 1988 presidential campaign. In other contexts, Nixon made comments that were indisputably anti-Semitic.

many of whom were Jewish, remembered the far right's unvarnished anti-Semitism of the 1930s—attacks on the “Jew Deal,” delusions that Jewish bankers caused the depression—and were sensitive to undercurrents of Jew hatred in the McCarthy movement. When Nixon emerged as a national figure, they began hearing troubling stories from his past campaigns. During Nixon's race against Douglas, for example, the Louisiana rabble-rouser Gerald Smith had caused a furor by asking voters to “help Richard Nixon get rid of the Jew-Communists.” Although Nixon repudiated Smith's support, suspicions lingered. Later in the race, anonymous operatives reminded California voters through phone calls and advertisements that Helen Douglas's husband, the actor Melvyn Douglas, was Jewish and had been born with the conspicuously Semitic last name Hesselberg. Occasionally, some claimed, Nixon himself would “slip” during a stump speech and call his rival “Helen Hesselberg,” only to hastily “correct” himself.²¹

Days after Nixon's nomination as vice president in 1952, these stories resurfaced. Murray Chotiner, who had been advising Nixon since 1946 and served as his campaign manager in 1950 (and who was himself Jewish), moved to stanch the damage. He drew up a public relations strategy, which he sent to Mendel Silberberg, Nixon's liaison to Hollywood. But the story persisted. During August and September, inquiries flooded the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), Jewish newspapers, and the campaign. In October, Baltimore's leading African-American newspaper reported that in July 1951 Nixon had bought a home whose deed contained a restricted covenant barring its resale or rental to “any person of the Semitic race, blood, or origin,” defining Semitic as including “Armenians, Jews, Hebrews, Persians and Syrians.” Panicky, Chotiner stepped up his response. He recruited the ADL to vouch for Nixon's tolerance and fed to the Jewish press a list of occasions when Nixon had aided various Jewish causes. The staff even drafted memos arguing that since the Supreme Court's 1948 ruling *Shelley v. Kraemer*, covenants were unconstitutional and inoperative and thus did not reflect on Nixon in any way. Nixon himself got involved in the replies. “I want to thank you for . . . your courtesy in calling my attention to the false rumor that I am anti-Semitic [sic],” he wrote to Edgar L. Strauss of Los Angeles, among other voters. “We have received a number of inquiries regarding this unfounded rumor.”²²

Whether due to Chotiner's damage control or simply a paucity of evidence, the Jew-hating image failed to gain fatal traction. But despite the assurances of the ADL, individual Jews kept watch. Nixon's old ally McIntyre Faries informed Chotiner that the owner of the Los Angeles eatery Sternberger's had switched his vote from Eisenhower to Stevenson when he heard about Nixon's covenant, a decision that was surely replicated in Jewish homes elsewhere. And the story evinced more staying power than its light coverage would suggest: In his 1956, 1960, and 1962 campaigns, Nixon had to squelch “whispering campaigns,” rebut criticisms in Jewish papers, and field constant queries to his office. During the 1960 race, Raymond Moley, the former Democrat turned Nixon booster, felt it necessary to deny the anti-Semitism charges in his *Newsweek* column.* For Fifties liberals concerned about anti-Semitism, the steady trickle of allegations, however thin, deepened their suspicion and hatred of Nixon.²³

Yet another dark image of Nixon also drew on old-time liberal demonology: Nixon as a corrupt stooge of big business. In the 1950s, political scandal usually meant graft, the exchange of favors, or lining one's pockets for political gain; until Watergate, the Harding administration's Teapot Dome fiasco loomed as the benchmark for scandal. In the fall of 1952, liberal journalists scoured Nixon's career for traces of financial misdoing. Early profiles in *The New Republic* and *The Reporter* raised questions about the role of the underworld figure Henry Grunewald in delivering Nixon a \$5,000 donation in 1950. They noted, too, that the Nixon campaign's official expenditures that year came in suspiciously low for such a high-profile race, and alleged that shadowy corporate interests had secretly made up the difference. Meanwhile, Truman's Justice Department pursued a story that back in 1945, while a navy lawyer, Nixon had shaken down a client for a loan. The Democratic National Committee charged that the Nixon family held a quarter of a million dollars' worth of ill-gotten real estate.²⁴

The most dogged investigator of Nixon's dealings was the seventy-two-year-old columnist Drew Pearson, an enemy since the Douglas race.

* In the 1960 campaign, press secretary Herb Klein compiled a list of “Celebrities for Nixon-Lodge” on which he underlined the names of Jewish stars Ray Bolger and Jerry Lewis in red pencil. Next to the name Efram Zimbalist he placed a question mark.

An old-style fedora-wearing gumshoe, Pearson earned his stars exposing financial shenanigans of the powerful. He commanded a wide following, both in his popular syndicated column, "Washington Merry-Go-Round," and on his weekly radio broadcasts. In the 1952 campaign, Pearson and his assistant Jack Anderson (who later took over the column) unearthed a slew of thinly substantiated reports about Nixon's shady transactions, which they fired at Nixon like grapeshot. The accusations came one after the next: that Nixon had interceded with the Justice Department to secure a tax break for Pasadena attorney Dana Smith, the keeper of Nixon's expense fund; that he had rescued Smith from gambling debts incurred at a Havana nightclub; that he had helped Nicola Malaxa, a disreputable Romanian industrialist, gain entrance to the United States to undertake business ventures with Nixon's old law partner; that Nixon took bribes from oil moguls; that he falsified his property value to get a tax break; that he illegally hired a Swedish maid. Nixon grew enraged, unable to keep pace with the accusations, frantically firing off denials and demanding retractions. Again, no hard proof of corruption emerged to tarnish Nixon irreparably, and by election day Pearson's once powerful cannonades faded into background noise. But although Nixon didn't go the way of Harding's Teapot Dome cronies, an air of venality hovered around him, casting suspicion on his every move thereafter.²⁵

Corruption did not turn out to be the defining piece of the Nixon-haters' portrait of their foe. But the probes of Nixon's finances in the fall of 1952 did produce the outstanding moment of his early career: the Checkers speech. The address not only crystallized the conservatives' image of Nixon as an all-American hero but proved seminal for liberals as well. Their reaction, indeed, established the outlines of the picture of Nixon that they would flesh out in the years ahead, as they transformed Nixon from another corrupt, business-friendly right-winger into a uniquely sinister operator of the machinery of modern politics.

Drew Pearson, among others, had heard whispers over the summer about the expense fund that Nixon's California backers had created to cover personal expenses. When word leaked that Pearson was snooping

around, Jack Anderson recalled, Nixon enlisted William Rogers, a mutual friend of his and Pearson's (and later a member of the Eisenhower and Nixon cabinets) to help. Rogers told Anderson, the reporter wrote, that if they published the story, Nixon would brand Pearson a Communist spy. Undaunted, Pearson disclosed Nixon's intimidation tactics on TV and resolved to probe deeper. In the end, however, it was not Pearson but the *New York Post*, the newspaper run by James Wechsler and Dorothy Schiff and beloved of liberal intellectuals, that broke the story on September 18, blaring news of the "Secret Rich Men's Trust Fund" across its front page.²⁶

This story marked the real start of Nixon's troubles. The day after the *Post* story appeared, Nixon was delivering a speech from his campaign train in Marysville, California. A carload of Young Democrats, recruited by Adlai Stevenson's California campaign manager, hurried to the depot to meet him, and arrived just as the train was pulling away for the next town on the whistle-stop tour. "Tell 'em about the \$16,000," one heckler jeered.* Stopping the train, Nixon launched into an angry retort from the outdoor platform. He blamed "communists and crooks" for spreading the story and warned the agitators to relent. But the next day in Eugene, Oregon, Charles Porter, a member of Americans for Democratic Action and a local Democratic Party activist, rounded up a group of University of Oregon students for another protest, replete with signs and banners. "Shh! Anyone who mentions \$16,000 is a Communist!" one said. "Will the Veep's salary be enough, Dick?" asked another. That evening, in Portland, it got even nastier. A crowd—"the ugliest we had met so far," Nixon recalled—staked out Nixon's hotel, dressed up as blind beggars, sporting dark glasses, rattling their tin cups and mocking: "Nickels for poor Nixon." They threw pennies into Nixon's car and blockaded the hotel's front door, bumping up against Nixon and Pat as they elbowed their way past. Within days, calls arose for Nixon to resign from the ticket, from liberal Republicans and pro-Eisenhower papers as well as Democratic regulars.²⁷

Leading the charge were the liberals in the news media, who at first

* The *Post* initially reported the sum as \$16,000. The expense fund actually contained \$18,235.

sounded a good-government cry against corruption. "The man who the people of the sovereign state of California believed was actually representing them," thundered the *Sacramento Bee*, "is the pet and protégé of rich Southern Californians. . . . Nixon is their subsidized front man, if not, indeed, their lobbyist." On the stump, Nixon had been decrying scandal in the Truman administration, but now, as *Newsweek* wrote, the fund imbroglio "cast a shadow on his crusade." Liberals attacked his hypocrisy. "Nixon is a kept man," *The New Republic* huffed. "He is also a phoney."²⁸

Had Nixon not then proceeded to deliver the Checkers speech, Eisenhower probably would have dropped him from the ticket. He also might have remained, in liberals' eyes, just another crooked politician. Instead, the speech, with its common-man touches, did more than just revive Nixon's fortunes; it became a rallying point for anti-Nixon sentiment, a touchstone for a new image more complicated than the stock figures that liberals had previously batted around.

Liberals recoiled at the speech. Nixon, they said, dodged key questions about the fund. He had failed to persuade them that he wasn't on the take from his "millionaire's club." He was self-righteously defensive, speaking in what Stewart Alsop later called a "high moral tone, [with an] air of injured innocence."²⁹ And they cried foul at Nixon's attempt to paint himself as an average American. Just a week earlier reporters were admiring "the Horatio Alger tradition of Richard Nixon's rise," noted *The New Republic*. "Now the bubble has burst." The speech, they said, had made clear that the reputation was bogus. "In describing his personal financial history Nixon offered the impression that [his] family is just barely remaining afloat," the *New York Post* editorialized, ". . . but we do not detect any desperate impoverishment in a man who has bought two homes, even if his Oldsmobile is two years old." Sarcastic references to "Poor Richard" abounded.³⁰

Worst of all, the populist persona was doused in sentimentality, which liberals felt was cheap, mass-produced, and false. At a time before politicians routinely used their family members as props, liberals faulted Nixon for showcasing his wife and trumpeting details of his personal life in the service of his ambition—a habit of "cultivating irrelevant emotions," as Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., later wrote, that "corrupts the political dialogue." (George Washington, Schlesinger sniffed, did not go around saying,

"Martha and I . . .") Liberals had to concede, of course, that the emotionalism worked. "On the level of political soap opera, there can be no question of the effectiveness of the Nixon performance," the *New York Post's* Max Lerner wrote. ". . . The pretty and adoring wife, the mortgages on the houses, the saga of a poor boy who became Senator—these were sure-fire stuff." But Lerner professed faith that people would be able to "strip away the phony from the real."³¹

Finally, the medium—television—was part of the message, and liberals distrusted it, too. In 1952, TV was still a novelty; that year's election was the first in which it played a large role. It was also still something of a bugbear, a repository for fears about the technological future. Although the trappings of the medium remained crude, Nixon's televised appeal made them wary. Even the primitive stage set and effects he used—the Los Angeles studio he spoke from was amateurishly decked out to resemble a suburban den, with draperies and a bookcase that barely disguised the soundstage—struck liberals as dangerously deceitful gimmickry, as state-of-the-art technology that might insidiously influence viewers. "What Nixon owed the American people was a straightforward answer to the question of ethical wrongdoing," Max Lerner wrote. "What he gave them instead was a slick and glossy job of television art."³²

Most of the public disagreed. Millions praised the speech as, of all things, sincere. Eventually, the outpouring of support for Nixon and Eisenhower's embrace of his running mate would force liberals to confront their own position as a minority. But at first, reluctant to blame their compatriots for accepting Nixon's everyman portrait, liberals faulted the high-tech staging, the power of television, even "the genius of American advertising agencies," as *The New York Times* reported. A dejected Max Lerner struggled to account for the raves Nixon received. "Ask yourself whether you are fool enough to fall for one of the slickest and sleaziest fake emotion routines that ever gulled a sentimental people," he challenged his readers. ". . . In its earlier phase, it [the scandal] pointed up the hypocrisy of public officials who preach morality and practice the double take. But the lesson of the Nixon case now is how a cynical group of men, using money and the new communication arts and the tried and true techniques of the propaganda masters, can stand an issue of morality on its

head and make the faker appear the martyr." Despair gripped the liberal camp. Faced with masters like Nixon, they privately wondered if the public could be brought around to support a progressive agenda again.³³

Publicly at least, most intellectuals reaffirmed their faith in democracy, and some dimly perceived the elitism implicit in their critique of the Checkers address. "On many occasions during the last few days," the *New York Post* editorialized, "we have heard the same remark from a lot of journalists, scholars and gentlemen: 'I know the Nixon speech was strictly soap opera, but you can't expect the ordinary guy to see through it.'" Such self-congratulation troubled the *Post's* editors. It suggested that the distance between them and their former New Deal allies was widening. While acknowledging the alarming popularity of "demagogues" such as McCarthy, the *Post* nonetheless wishfully affirmed that "most of the people"—they did not say where they got their statistics—"know the difference between a slick press agent's mind and a responsive human heart."³⁴

The reaction to the Checkers speech—and the reaction to the reaction—held the seeds of a dilemma that would flower later in the 1950s. Still frightened by the European experience with fascism, by the Continental masses' susceptibility to irrational racist appeals, liberals questioned their own compatriots' essential goodness. Americans too, they saw, accepted crude stereotypes, bought into personalized pitches, showed impatience with complex problems. But the liberals stopped short of writing off the middle class; the hand-wringing over Checkers previewed, but hardly resolved, an ongoing conundrum about whether "most of the people" would succumb to emotional appeals and high-tech trickery. Indeed, the liberal predicament only worsened in the ensuing years. As Eisenhower and Nixon's election victory in November showed, and their reelection in 1956 confirmed, liberal ideals no longer commanded support from a majority of Americans as they had under FDR. Shielding themselves from such an admission, liberals found it easier to chalk up the masses' defection to the villainous powers and artful deceptions of Richard Nixon.

"I have spent God knows how many unproductive hours asking myself if I was really put on this earth to write about the likes of Richard Nixon and

Joe McCarthy," reflected Richard Rovere late in his career. Rovere grouped the two men together as "transparent demagogues and frauds," and like many of his peers believed that Nixon's villainy was best exhibited in the Red-baiting that he fomented alongside McCarthy. Like the headstrong Wisconsin senator, Nixon struck liberals as a vicious smear artist, and his anti-Communist drumming would long be remembered as McCarthyism's backbeat. Yet unlike Rovere, many liberals drew sharp distinctions between the two men, contrasting McCarthy's tail-gunner nihilism with Nixon's stiletto attacks. Not just a comrade but also a foil to Nixon, McCarthy made Nixon seem less like a crude reactionary than a frighteningly deft operator.³⁵

Many casual observers, it was true, viewed Nixon and McCarthy as partners in grime, mud-slinging bullies who magnified the Communist threat for partisan gain. Friends and colleagues, both arrived in Congress in 1947—McCarthy in the Senate, Nixon in the House—and won renown for their full-throated attacks on Communists in government and their effete sympathizers. Where Nixon trained his fire on Hiss, Douglas, and Stevenson, the darlings of the intellectuals, McCarthy targeted, more idiosyncratically (if not randomly), policy hand Owen Lattimore, Senator Millard Tydings, and General George Marshall. And where McCarthy bounded to notoriety with sensational charges that garnered banner headlines starting in 1950, Nixon had paved the way. Whether or not one agreed with Drew Pearson and Jack Anderson, who contended that Nixon's use of "guilt by association" in the Voorhis campaign was "the real birth of McCarthyism," it is true (as the historian Fawn Brodie later discovered) that McCarthy's famous Wheeling, West Virginia, speech, which launched him into the headlines, drew heavily from—even plagiarized from—the speech Nixon had given weeks earlier on the House floor about Alger Hiss's conviction. Nixon continued to share McCarthy's rhetoric into the 1952 campaign, mixing fears of communism with suspicion of the eggheads. He branded Stevenson "Adlai the Appeaser . . . who got a PhD from Dean Acheson's College of Cowardly Communist Containment."³⁶

Despite superficial resemblances, however, Nixon and McCarthy had their differences. After the Republicans won the White House in November, McCarthy's nightmare scenarios about the enemy within began to

harm his own party. Eisenhower, on cool terms with the senator, tasked Nixon with controlling his renegade friend. Gingerly, Nixon tried to dissuade McCarthy from targeting the new administration, but despite repeated promises McCarthy wouldn't cooperate. By March 1954, McCarthy was blasting the U.S. Army for promoting a dentist who had refused to sign a loyalty oath, and his allies feared he was going to bring down the whole party. Sensing a moment to strike, Adlai Stevenson, priming himself for another White House bid, assailed the GOP in a Lincoln Day speech as "divided against itself, half Eisenhower, half McCarthy."³⁷

With the president skittish, it fell to Nixon to deliver a televised response. His address, aired on NBC and CBS, marked his biggest public moment since Checkers. Studiously omitting McCarthy's name, Nixon condemned those who despite their "effective work exposing communists" now by their "reckless talk" and "questionable methods" jeopardized the anti-Communist project. Slamming previous (Democratic) administrations—and taking another potshot at former Secretary of State Dean Acheson: Nixon concluded in his familiar tone of exaggerated thoughtfulness: "I have heard people say, 'Well, why all of this hullabaloo about being fair when you're dealing with a gang of traitors? . . . After all, they're a bunch of rats.' . . . Well, I agree they're a bunch of rats, but just remember this. When you go out to shoot rats, you have to shoot straight, because when you shoot wildly, it not only means that the rat may get away more easily, you make it easier on the rat."³⁸

Afterward, the press construed Nixon's speech, with its painfully extended metaphor, as a break with McCarthy. The senator considered it a betrayal. Again, the liberals saw it differently. By continuing to skewer the Democrats, the *New York Post* wrote, "Nixon proceeded again to practice the thing he had denounced . . . undocumented and unsupported hearsay and innuendo." In fact, said Arthur Schlesinger and James Doyle on behalf of ADA, Nixon "embraced McCarthyism as the Republican Party's major political program." They agreed that the vice president's rhetorical style hadn't matured since Checkers. *The Washington Post* called the speech "melodramatic," and Max Lerner derided its "homey phony touches [and] its too slick sophisms."³⁹

A few months later, McCarthy self-destructed as a result of his assault

on the army and slid swiftly into disrepute. But Nixon, touring the country on behalf of Republican congressional candidates, seemed to be picking up the mantle McCarthy had just put down. He accused the Democratic Party of being beholden to its left wing and dangerously soft on communism. Privately backed by Eisenhower, cheered on by top Republicans, Nixon recounted breathlessly that on entering the White House in 1953, "we found in the files a blueprint for socializing America," and tossed barbs at Acheson and Truman, as well as Stevenson, whom he accused of "spreading pro-Communist propaganda as he has attacked with violent fury the economic system of the United States and praised the Soviet economy." Stevenson, who was doing his own stumping in the fall of 1954, quipped that the vice president was embarking on an "ill-will tour."⁴⁰

A variety of Nixon-haters responded, not just in word but in image. Walt Kelly, the cartoonist who drew the strip *Pogo*, introduced a character named "Indian Charlie," modeled after Nixon, to be an ally of his McCarthyesque bobcat Simple J. Malarkey. Victor Arnautoff, a Stanford art professor, painted a work called *Dick McSmear* that was accepted in the 1955 San Francisco Art Festival but then ordered removed. Yet without question no one captured—or defined—the image of Nixon as McCarthy's successor better than the cartoonist Herbert Block (known as Herblock) of *The Washington Post*.⁴¹

Herblock had joined the *Post* in 1945, and by the decade's end was syndicated in more than 250 papers. He drew such memorable Nixon images that the two men's names would forever be linked. The consumer activist Ralph Nader, recalling the cartoons of his youth, once said, "I can't think of Nixon without thinking of Herblock," and many of his generation concurred. Zeroing in on a few key features—the five-o'clock shadow, the scowl, the pointy nose—Herblock captured Nixon exactly as the liberals saw him: mud-slinging, opportunistic, and ugly. In 1952, he had drawn a muck-splattered McCarthy and Nixon side by side, having just defaced an Adlai Stevenson poster, as a smiling Eisenhower gently chided: "Naughty, naughty." Now, two years later, the cartoonist drew a fallen McCarthy, his trademark bucket of tar toppled over, passing his black brush to Nixon, who raced to finish the smear job. Nixon's campaign trav-

els—to ninety-five cities that fall—further inspired the cartoonist's acid wit. "While Nixon went from city to city and state to state smearing reputable and responsible legislators," Herblock wrote, "it occurred to me that he was figuratively criss-crossing the country by sewer." On October 29, the cartoonist sketched his most stinging Nixon yet: a drawing of the vice president clambering out of a manhole, his suitcase stamped with a dozen airport stickers, while a local booster shouted to a welcoming party: "Here he comes now!" No image better caught what Democratic Party chairman Stephen Mitchell was calling the vice president's "gutter campaign." The drawing scarred Nixon: He promptly canceled his subscription to the *Post*, and six years later, when he was asked why he wasn't attacking his presidential rival John Kennedy with his usual gusto, the candidate remarked, "I have to erase the Herblock image first."⁴²

There was an element of the thug in this rendering of Nixon, but the liberals recognized, too, that the cunning Nixon was more refined than the barroom-brawling McCarthy. As the liberals saw it, McCarthy barged through the corridors of power hurling outlandish slurs; Nixon carefully deployed his rhetorical techniques—the "innuendo," "guilt by association," and similar methods that they detailed in their analyses—against choice targets. "McCarthyism in a white collar," Stevenson labeled him. Irving Howe caught the contrast when he wrote about Nixon's so-called break with McCarthy. "Nixon never ventured . . . a moral judgment of McCarthyism," Howe wrote. "His only complaint, and how revealing it is of his small-minded shrewdness, was that Joe was 'inept.' And by comparison, Joe was." It was Nixon's use of specific techniques, not just anti-Communist bombast—a sinister sophistication, not a double-barreled crudeness—that liberals said made him dangerous.⁴³

McCarthy's demise left Eisenhower's number two as the liberals' enemy number one. As the president remained popular with the 1956 elections approaching, Nixon stood out all the more as a favorite whipping boy. For the first time in history, a vice president became a central target in the opposing party's campaign for the White House.

If his differences with McCarthy accented Nixon's deadly sophistica-

tion, the contrast with Eisenhower underscored his anything-to-win unscrupulousness. (Irving Howe called Nixon "a well-oiled drawbridge between McCarthyite barbarism and Eisenhower respectability.") Although intellectuals mocked Eisenhower as a dullard who read cowboy novels and lazed on the golf course, he commanded reverence as Europe's liberator. Not so Nixon. "Mr. Nixon is cynical," wrote August Hecksher, "whereas Mr. Eisenhower has been singularly pure and disinterested in motive." "Eisenhower unites the country and heals its divisions," echoed Walter Lippmann, while Nixon "divides and embitters." The president's sunny congeniality made Nixon's dark combativeness all the more unpalatable.⁴⁴

Protective of his avuncular image, Eisenhower assigned Nixon his dirty work, whether reining in McCarthy or playing hatchet man in the '52 and '54 campaigns. The roles elevated Nixon's public profile, if not always for the better. Nixon also played a more substantive role in the administration than any vice president before him, helping to make him, pollster Louis Harris found, "a focal point of expressed concern."⁴⁵ When Eisenhower suffered a heart attack in September 1955 and a bout of intestinal disease nine months later, the succession question became no mere parlor game. Journalists ran articles asking, "Would he be a good president?" as *Life's* Robert Coughlan put it, presenting the pros and cons with predictable even-handedness.⁴⁶ The preferred adjective for Nixon was "controversial"; like the celebrity well known for his well-knownness, Nixon at times seemed controversial because of his controversiality.

Republicans as well as Democrats saw how Nixon polarized Americans, and one GOP cadre, led by Harold Stassen of Minnesota, lobbied Ike to "Dump Nixon" from the ticket in 1956. First behind the scenes, then at the Republican Convention, administration insiders and party chiefs jockeyed for Nixon's dismissal, while loyalists sported pins saying, "Stick with Dick." In airing their worries about Nixon, Republicans handed their opponents an irresistible issue. Nixon's foes made his status as "the nation's life insurance policy," in the words of TRB, a focus of their 1956 campaign.⁴⁷

Liberals cast the 1956 election as a referendum on Nixon. At *The New York Times*, John Oakes, the editorial-page editor, sent publisher Arthur Sulzberger a ten-page report called "The Case Against Richard Nixon."

The *Times* was more of an establishment paper than its liberal rival, the *Post*. It had backed Eisenhower in 1952. But the liberal Oakes hoped to sway Sulzberger not to repeat the error, and he thought Nixon's voting pattern, unsavory political style, and checkered past were the key. Portraying Nixon as a cutthroat opportunist whose "eye is on the main chance, irrespective of principle," Oakes pleaded with Sulzberger to endorse Stevenson. Ultimately, however, the paper endorsed Ike again, albeit unenthusiastically.⁴⁸

More public in its anti-Nixon campaign was Americans for Democratic Action. In November 1955, ADA chairman Joseph Rauh declared, perhaps in a fit of wishful thinking, that Nixon's noxiousness would prompt independents and moderates to vote Democratic. His group compiled a scalding booklet called *Nixon: The Second Man*, which it released in July as the campaign geared up. Noting Eisenhower's frail health, the pamphlet spoke of "deep anxieties as to Mr. Nixon's fitness to succeed him," and recounted the litany of Nixon's transgressions, from the Voorhis campaign through his over-the-top rhetoric of 1954. Reliable Nixon-hating organs advertised the brochure. Getting ahold of Nixon's itinerary, ADA political secretary Violet Gunther wrote to members in towns from St. Petersburg and Louisville to Phoenix and Spokane, inviting them to buy copies to distribute when Nixon came to town. Nixon-haters across the country signed up. "We will be ready and waiting for our 'illustrious' visitor Nixon," responded Franklin A. Moss of the New Jersey ADA as he ordered 150 pamphlets. One ADA member wrote a song called "The Ballad of Richard Nixon," which he performed at the group's annual Roosevelt Day Dinner, prompting an investigation by Nixon's office for possible Communist sympathies. (Also investigated was "some fellow named Jack Purcell," who, Republican Party aide and Nixon loyalist Robert Humphreys was told, "turns up at the Press Club to play Commyish songs which are diatribes against the Vice President.")⁴⁹

The Democratic Party followed ADA's lead. "Everyone, we believe, is in agreement that the possibility of Vice President Nixon succeeding to the Presidency is an important issue in the 1956 campaign," the party's advertising agency, Norman, Craig & Kummel, set out in a memo. ". . . We are fortunate in the fact that an amazingly large segment of the population,

and even of his own party, seems to dislike and mistrust him instinctively. . . . It is best to start with the assumption that Nixon as President of the United States is an extremely distasteful idea to millions of Americans . . . without wasting valuable time in establishing his undesirability." The Democrats compiled a dossier on Nixon's transgressions and set up a "Chamber of Smears" showcasing Nixon's dark side. At the party's presidential convention in Chicago, speakers spit out Nixon's name like an epithet. "From the first bang of the gavel until the final balloon fell to earth," *Newsweek* reported, "Nixon was the target, skewered as 'the vice hatchet man,' 'the White House pet midget,' a traveler of 'the low road.'" A *New Republic* cover by illustrator Robert Osborn depicted a huge, smiling Eisenhower effigy with Nixon lurking behind it, pulling the strings. Accepting that people "liked Ike," grammatically fastidious advertisements in *The New York Times* warned that "No matter whom you like, the Republican Party is firmly controlled by the young and ambitious Richard Nixon." Brochures mailed by New York City Democrats predicted disaster "if Fate promoted Nixon to the White House." "Nixon" and "Ike's health" climbed to the top of *Newsweek* readers' election-year concerns.⁵⁰

Stevenson, who had sparred with Nixon during the 1954 midterm races, now placed the vice president at the center of a broad critique of America in the 1950s. Taking heart from his party's off-year gains, he told a New York audience in April 1956 that "the 1954 rejection of the Vice-President's campaign appeal about communists in government, the election of a Democratic Congress, and the censure [of McCarthy] . . . marked the turning of the tide against the high point of the flood of hate, hysteria and fear." He painted a tableau of a "New America" of decency, respect, and neighborliness. Then, as the campaign heated up, he gave a special assignment to his adviser John Kenneth Galbraith, the Harvard economist. "Ken," Stevenson told Galbraith, "I want you to write the speeches against Nixon. You have no tendency to be fair." Accepting the "notable compliment," Galbraith wrote a brutally hard-hitting diatribe that Stevenson delivered in Los Angeles on October 27, late in the campaign. The election ahead, it said, marked "a fork in the political road." One path led to a bright future, the other to "a land of slander and scare; the land of sly innuendo, the poison pen, the anonymous phone call and hustling, push-

ing, shoving; the land of smash and grab and anything to win." This land, Stevenson asserted, "is Nixonland. But I say to you this is not America." Stevenson had also by 1956 accepted the need for television ads. The Democrats aired a spot that showed a sketch of Nixon dwarfed by a presidential chair as a voice-over asked, "Nervous about Nixon? President Nixon?" Another planned commercial spoofed the show *This Is Your Life*, dredging up people from Nixon's past to deliver scathing testimonials. But Stevenson, fearing that it signaled desperation, scuttled the ad.⁵¹

Most controversially, Stevenson linked Nixon's untrustworthiness to rising fears of nuclear war. In November 1955, the Soviet Union had exploded its first hydrogen bomb, and by the following fall Stevenson was warning of a debilitating arms race. Max Lerner tied the issue to Eisenhower's health and Nixon's character: another heart attack and it would be Nixon's finger on the button. Stevenson followed, tying Nixon, the H-bomb, and Ike's heart condition together into what Lerner called the "triple issue." In a nationally televised speech on the eve of the 1956 vote, he broached the "distasteful" likelihood that Eisenhower wouldn't finish his term and called Nixon's probable ascension "the central truth about . . . [tomorrow's] most fateful decision." Stevenson put it bluntly: "As a citizen more than a candidate . . . I recoil at the prospect of Mr. Nixon as custodian of this nation's future, as guardian of the hydrogen bomb, as representative of America in the world, as Commander-in-Chief of the United States armed forces."⁵²

To Schlesinger and fellow Stevenson adviser John Bartlow Martin, the attack sounded desperate. By indecorously predicting Eisenhower's demise, they thought, Stevenson had "tarnished his reputation" for fairness—exactly what distinguished him from the likes of Nixon. The conundrum was a familiar one for Fifties liberals, who seesawed over how to counter Nixon's jabs. When Stephen Mitchell, the Democratic chairman, proposed retaliating in kind, intellectuals balked. If victory were achieved on such terms, asked William Lee Miller in *The Reporter*, "then whose is the victory?" On the other hand, he cheerfully ventured, "if we stick by what we believe, we may not win as often, but when we do we shall know what the victory means." Miller's prescription, like Stevenson's hyper-dignified, above-it-all posture, offered the luxury of consis-

tency but not the necessity of victory. Like the *New York Post's* commentary after Checkers, it bespoke an abiding faith that playing by the rules would be its own reward, and that in the long run the people's better angels would prevail. But that faith was coming to seem like self-delusion.⁵³

While liberals weighed the cost of descending to Nixon's level, Nixon tried to remake himself as more mature and less combative—the first of what would be many "New" Nixons. Some establishment journalists, including Stewart Alsop and *The New York Times's* James Reston, believed him; conservative supporters, meanwhile, felt saddened at his mellowing or betrayed by his apostasy. Liberals, however, dismissed any possibility that he was turning over a new leaf. "Is there a New Nixon?" they joked. "Absolutely: The old Nixon was sly and opportunistic. The new Nixon is just the opposite: opportunistic and sly." If anything, they felt, the vice president's reinvention underscored his lack of a core identity. Anyone who donned a new persona so casually, they reasoned, must be a synthetic and artificial creature of public relations men. Liberals concluded that Nixon was, as William Shannon wrote, "the outstanding product of the new synthetic politics in America . . . [of] the science of conditioning and manipulating men's minds."⁵⁴

As early as 1954, when Nixon first forswore his feisty campaigning, observers wondered about his capacity to change. Conversations centered on whether Nixon had evolved into a statesman—or, as Stevenson giped in 1956, whether he had simply "put away his switchblade and assumed the aspect of an Eagle Scout." Liberals believed they knew the answer: the new guises were just more proof of Nixon's Machiavellian nature. When a dinner guest gushed to Dean Acheson about Nixon's changed manner, he replied, "Madam, for five million dollars you can change the public impression of almost anyone." To liberals, the appearance of the New Nixon suggested only that the old, expedient Nixon would remake his image whenever the old one no longer worked.⁵⁵

Herblock, as always, caught the change in his cartoons. In place of the sewer-dwelling smear artist, he now drew the vice president as an opportunist trying to shed his past. In one 1956 sketch, Nixon answered the door

on Halloween to see, standing before him with their buckets of tar, "Nixon 1954," "Nixon 1952" (in a cocker spaniel mask), "Nixon 1950," and "Nixon 1948"—as the "New Nixon" yelled: "Now you kids beat it!" In another 1956 image he captured Nixon's ability to don and doff his various personae. Examining his wardrobe, Nixon wondered, "What'll I wear today?" as he chose among street clothes labeled "Dead-End Gang," a varsity sweater marked "All-American Boy," formal wear saying "Look, Folks—I'm a Statesman," and a garish plaid coat stamped "Political Pitchman."⁵⁶

Nixon's self-reinvention did force liberals to reassess him in one sense. Previously, many judged him a right-winger with a record of "almost unbroken subservience to the most reactionary elements of the business community," as William Shannon wrote. Now, looking at a career riddled with stands along the Republican spectrum, he appeared, as Rovere phrased it, "innocent of doctrine," an opportunist who "would rather be President than be Right." The new liberal consensus held that Nixon adopted his positions, even his supposedly inveterate anti-communism, from expedience. He was, Stevenson said, "the kind of man who would cut down a redwood tree, and then mount the stump and make a speech for conservation." His lack of convictions, they said, betrayed an essential hollowness, flexibility in the service of self-advancement. Although liberals held fast to a picture of America as an authentic democracy, Nixon—devoid of beliefs, willing to do anything to win—seemed the quintessentially inauthentic man who might undermine it all.⁵⁷

The Nixon-haters used various metaphors to describe his artificiality. First, noting his youthful dabbling in high-school and community theater, they called him a Hollywood actor who "memorize[d] his lines" and played any part required. His Checkers performance marked only the most successful in a series of portrayals. "He has been understudying so many different roles and reciting so many different scripts," *The Reporter* noted in contemplating a Nixon presidency, "that it is impossible to say how he would act as protagonist." Murray Kempton noted the "pleasure of the actor" as Nixon managed to "contrive the pitch of proper scorn" in responding to attacks. When his eyes filled with tears after getting Eisenhower's vote of confidence in 1952, his old drama teacher, watching on TV, was said to comment: "Here goes my actor." Liberals felt that said it all.⁵⁸

A second trope also drew on Nixon's adolescent activities: Nixon as the "bright young debater." Lacking core convictions, his detractors said, Nixon could advance any argument with equal facility. His boyhood success in forensics, they surmised, shaped his principle-free view of politics, and besting Voorhis in the 1946 debates convinced him of the virtues of his style. But because liberals thought Nixon assumed his various stands provisionally, for reasons of the moment, they distrusted his every profession of belief. He was, argued William Lee Miller, "under a bit of a shadow . . . [since] one is never sure just where the conviction ended and sheer artistry began."⁵⁹

Finally, critics snidely recalled Nixon's adolescent stint as a carnival barker. After the Checkers speech—which one critic dubbed "as slick a performance as ever devised on Madison Avenue for soap or cereals"—liberals portrayed Nixon as a "salesman" and a "huckster." His speeches were compared to "advertising copy," his facial expressions to "a Pepsodent smile,"⁶⁰ his ideas to "slogans for a thorough sales campaign," his manner to that of "the television pitchman . . . cogently explain[ing] the benefits of life insurance one evening . . . frenziedly shouting the dubious virtues of a headache nostrum" the next. *The Reporter* read profound meaning into Nixon's acceptance of the Los Angeles Sales Executive Club's "Salesman of the Year" award in 1954.⁶¹

These metaphors suggested a man who had reached the top through his skill with Hollywood and Madison Avenue techniques. Indeed, the notion of technique itself infused the liberal view of Nixon. In the unsettling quality of "a sales 'pitch' too glib and too simple," opined the ADA *Second Man* pamphlet, "lies the origin of the diffuse, unfocussed, yet steadily mounting distrust of Richard Nixon. He has become identified with a method, a technique of selling himself or his party rather than clarifying issues or arguing them." Liberals had already flagged the dirty tricks—the anonymous phone calls and deceptive flyers—that marked Nixon's early campaigns. Likewise, they had grown wise to his rhetorical tools—the Red-baiting ruses and verbal ploys that they ritually deconstructed in their magazines. But now in the mid-Fifties, they awakened to the power of modern techniques of manipulation in the political sphere. Liberals spoke darkly of "professionals" such as Nixon's mentor Murray

Chotiner who were using breakthroughs in technology and psychology to turn the age-old art of politics into a cold science. This state-of-the-art demagoguery that Nixon practiced was more fearsome than any imprecations hurled from behind a podium or any handbill tacked to a tree.⁶²

Even as Stevenson and his egghead followers reconciled themselves to television's growing importance, they remained wary of it. In his 1956 acceptance speech, Stevenson called political advertising "the ultimate indignity to the democratic process," and insisted that "the minds of Americans can [not] be manipulated by shows, slogans and the arts of advertising." Beneath the protestations of faith in the people, liberals watched nervously as Nixon and the Republicans embraced the new politics, from the Checkers speech onward. "Nixon's arrival in the Vice-Presidency coincided with the full flowering of television," Douglass Cater wrote in *The Reporter* in 1958, "and he has applied many of TV's techniques to develop the potential of his office. He has demonstrated that the Vice-President, if he is skillful, can manipulate the fade-in and the fade-out, the filters and the cropping devices familiar to the cinematographer." Since Nixon was at home "in the realm of artifice," liberals felt, he proved an easy master of this dangerous medium.⁶³

Advertising and public relations exacerbated the potential for electronic-age deception. In *The Hidden Persuaders*, Vance Packard's exposé of the ad men's subliminal manipulations, the journalist noted how Chotiner and Republican operatives grafted newfangled techniques onto national political campaigns, producing "spectacular strides in changing the traditional characteristics of political life." Much more readily than the Democrats, the Republicans, Packard wrote, set out to "merchandise" their candidates through unconscious appeals to the instincts and emotions instead of reason. "The man who benefited from many, if not all, these techniques," the single figure who "has been described by perceptive observers as a new breed of American politician," Packard added, was none other than Richard Nixon.⁶⁴

Reflecting liberal thinking, Packard saw these innovations as an assault on the Enlightenment notion that reason should guide human decisions. Bypassing rationality, they threatened the American ideal of the citizen as "thoughtful voter, rugged individualist . . . [and] flowering of

twentieth-century progress and enlightenment" by stripping him of his capacity for intelligent choice. "Disturbing Orwellian" implications followed: Without the bedrock assumptions that individuals could reliably interpret information and make judgments that reflected their will, democracy took on a different character. Cunning, self-serving leaders could, without the public's free consent, dupe them into following their own agenda. Transparency of meaning and individual autonomy were supposed to provide a check on would-be dictators. Such suppositions, Packard feared, were losing purchase. Nixon, some said, was to blame. "He is the only major American politician in our history," Schlesinger claimed, "who came to prominence by techniques which, if generally adopted, would destroy the whole fabric of mutual confidence on which democracy rests."⁶⁵

The liberal intellectuals of the Fifties, of course, were confident that they themselves would never be gulled by Nixon's hidden persuasion. But they feared he would prey upon an ignorant and malleable public. That was why they felt compelled to rebut Nixon's populist self-portrait, debunking his common-man pretensions, demystifying his cons. Without their smarts and vigilance, they implied, Nixon would dupe voters and ruin America.

But if liberals sometimes claimed that they needed to awaken the public to Nixon's deceptions, at other moments they betrayed another fear: that Nixon might indeed speak for an American middle class that, as liberals saw it, basked uncritically in the postwar materialism. Having proved distressingly receptive to McCarthyism, the people now showed themselves, intellectuals felt, to be irresponsibly indifferent to social concerns. Galbraith, in *The Affluent Society*, his critique of a society in which "the bland lead the bland," bemoaned the average family's numbness to "public squalor," its complicity in the neglect of poverty, public health, and the environment. David Riesman's comfort- and status-seeking "other-directed" citizen epitomized the problem, hiding his ambitions and drives behind a facade of complaisance. When Eisenhower beamed that "Americans are 'a happy people' doing exactly what they choose," liberals thought that was precisely the problem.⁶⁶

By the mid-1950s, liberals were depicting the protean Nixon as the per-

sonification of the other-directed striver. The vice president's self-promoting image-consciousness and anti-intellectual posturing struck them as embodying and encouraging the worst of the middle class. "If it were possible to take a photograph of his brain," Kempton gibed, "it would show the single sentence, 'What will people think?'" Nixon was "the 'other-directed' man in politics," agreed Schlesinger, "... obsessed with appearances rather than the reality of things, obsessed above all with his own appearance, his own image, seeking reassurance through winning, but never knowing why he is so mad to win or what he will do with his victory." Irving Howe added that Nixon "seems to represent a potential in American life . . . of a fairly prosperous, politically besieged, emotionally tight-lipped, rigidly conformist suburban America in which all values are transvalued into salability, all techniques have become devices for persuasion, and persuasion itself is indistinguishable from a hidden bludgeon." Ironically, these versions of Nixon conceded that there was some truth in Nixon's populist portrait. Nixon *did* represent the common folk, they seemed to be saying, and like them he was shallow and petty.⁶⁷

Though superficially at odds, the portraits of Nixon as a hidden persuader and a middle-class striver both fed liberal fears that something like fascism might come to American shores. The demagoguery and the use of "the Big Lie," the high-tech propaganda, even the lingering whiffs of corporatism and anti-Semitism—these traits suggested, if as a distant and unlikely scenario, the makings of an authoritarian who would prey upon a docile public. No one called Nixon a Nazi in the Fifties (though in time they would), but the implications hovered beneath the surface of references to Nixon's "dark" side and the "danger" he posed to democracy. And a few liberals toyed with the verboten epithet: William Costello noted "fascist tendencies" in the man and "an insinuation that Big Brother is watching" in his utterances. Brooding about the prospect of a Nixon presidency—an increasing likelihood as the decade closed—Costello predicted that "anyone running afoul of policy . . . could expect only the swiftest and most merciless reprisals," for Nixon "understands the use of power but not the unwritten restraints on its use." Drew Pearson and Jack Anderson also feared that Nixon, if elected president, would "revert to type," "purge innocent[s]," and order his "personal goons" to impose his fiats.⁶⁸

Whether Nixon actually harbored this potential was a question that the balance of his career would complicate rather than resolve. His presidency, as perceived by not just liberals but others, became a battleground for fights over power and its restraints. But whatever its validity, the portrait of Nixon as a dangerous manipulator served as a powerful political symbol. For the moment, as Nixon began his 1960 presidential run, his villainous image galvanized his enemies, who worked furiously to stave off their worst political nightmare.

Talk of political image making suffused the 1960 election. While Nixon easily won his party's nomination, the Democrats chose Senator John F. Kennedy of Massachusetts, who struck liberals as witty and glamorous but not terribly weighty or progressive. Some charged that the two nominations represented the triumph of style over substance. "They are junior executives on the make, political status seekers, end products of the Age of Public Relations," scoffed Eric Sevareid of CBS. "... The 'managerial revolution' has come to politics, and Nixon and Kennedy are its first completely packaged products." Critic Dwight Macdonald, too, alienated from the new prefabricated politics, shrugged at liberals' desperate "Keep Nixon out of the White House" campaign and trumpeted his decision not to vote.⁶⁹

At first some liberals had looked to the twice-defeated Stevenson, but he lacked both the support and the will. The prospect of losing to his arch foe deterred him too. "I despise Nixon so much that I couldn't be trusted not to say something absolutely terrible about him in the course of the campaign," he told Schlesinger, defensively. Instead, Schlesinger, Galbraith, and their cohort warmed to Kennedy, who radiated the qualities Nixon lacked: charm, wit, respect for intellectuals. To those who lumped the two candidates together, Schlesinger responded with a book called *Kennedy or Nixon: Does It Make Any Difference?* (it did to him), which became a *summa* of Nixon-hating. Rehearsing the view of Nixon as unprincipled and manipulative, Schlesinger wrote that the vice president had "no ideas, only methods . . . He cares about winning . . . he cares about the 'image' (in one of his own favorite words) that the public has of him;

he cares about appearances. But he does not care much about what is intellectually or morally the right or wrong position to take on questions of public policy." JFK, in contrast, was serious and confident in his identity, sharing none of Nixon's obsession with externals. Increasingly, intellectuals joined Schlesinger in the cause. On university campuses and in high-brow circles, Nixon-bashing rose to new heights, as comedy troupes such as Chicago's Second City, nightclub comics including Mort Sahl, and a Broadway play by Gore Vidal turned satirizing the Republican candidate into sport.⁷⁰

Image talk peaked that fall with the first ever televised general election debates. With TV sets now in nine of ten American homes, as many as 120 million people watched Kennedy and Nixon square off on September 26. As historians would oft retell, viewers saw a sharp contrast: Kennedy, standing calmly in a dark suit, projected unflappability. Handsome, relaxed, he answered questions crisply. Nixon, recovering from a knee infection and a cold, looked terrible. Sweat streaked the pancake makeup that had been applied to his five o'clock shadow, and his gray suit blended in with the walls. Afterward, the press, declaring Kennedy victorious, blamed Nixon's appearance for his loss. "Fire the make-up man," Nixon's aide Herb Klein was told. "Everybody in this part of the country thinks Nixon is sick. Three doctors agreed he looked as if he had just suffered a coronary."⁷¹

If a consensus held that Kennedy had bested Nixon on image, some critics felt that the whole concern with televised appearances debased politics. When Daniel Boorstin derided the so-called Great Debates for sully-ing an important democratic rite, he was but one voice in a chorus of liberals and intellectuals. With their fears of PR and TV and slick advertising, they worried that a new culture of manufactured images, of Boorstin's pseudo-events, would drive reason and authenticity from the political sphere altogether. The debates, Boorstin said, were hastening the collapse. "If we test presidential candidates by their talents on TV quiz performances, we will, of course, choose presidents for precisely these qualifications. . . . Reality tends to conform to the pseudo-event."⁷²

Indeed, whether or not Kennedy outdebated Nixon, reality conformed to that perception. In November, Nixon lost, it might be said, by a

whisker. With a margin of just 0.2 percent of the vote, Kennedy won, in the analysts' telling, on the strength of his image. Nixon, so skilled with TV during the Fifties, ironically now fell victim to an increasingly image-conscious culture. Once the savvy expert, he now came across as flat-footed, behind the times. In 1958, *The Reporter's* Douglass Cater had predicted that "in this age of fast and fleeting publicity, the merchants of modern mass communications are ready to discard the old and faded figure for someone who is fresh and interesting," and that Nixon faced his toughest job yet, to "achieve the highest form of art—the art that appears artless." In 1960 (and again in 1962 when Nixon lost his bid to become governor of California), Tricky Dick failed to pull it off. For the time being, liberals could believe that Americans were able to see through the scrim of appearances that Nixon draped before them and could glimpse the heavy hand of the petty striver pulling the strings.⁷³

In their celebration, however, liberals forgot that Nixon's defeat was almost a triumph, and in their glee they failed to foresee that his retirement would prove short-lived. When Nixon surprised them all by winning the presidency six years after his political career had been declared finished, liberals reached back into the Fifties for their images of Tricky Dick. It took little time for the old image to be adapted to new conditions and become a cultural touchstone all over again.

Watergate, of course, represented cultural triumph for the image of Tricky Dick; if the image had been pronounced before Nixon's presidential crisis, it became indelible thereafter. Yet even at their moment of vindication, liberals still filtered Nixon through their ideological and cultural lenses. When Nixon delivered his farewell address in August 1974 from the White House East Room, in which he dwelled on his parents and his boyhood, many heard only mawkish echoes of Checkers. When Nixon shook hands with the White House staff, they shook their heads that he was pursuing his cynical image making right until the end. James Taylor's song "Line 'Em Up," written some years later, captured these feelings. In rhyming couplets, Taylor recalled how the president, in a false show of sadness, wallowed in self-pity while privately relishing the political opportunity his resignation speech presented. Even as he hit bottom, the cagey Nixon, in Taylor's telling, looked forward to pressing the flesh one

last time with those who had served him in the White House, so that he might publicly display his affinity for ordinary Americans. Meg Greenfield, who had moved from *The Reporter* to *The Washington Post* a few years earlier, recalled hearing such sentiments from her liberal friends at the time. "Did you hear that performance?" they asked. "Would you believe he's still trying that stuff?" Greenfield herself—the self-professed "last unreconstructed Nixon critic on earth"—had heard the speech on her car radio and sympathized with the president and his "unendurable shame." But her fellow Nixon-haters, she wrote, couldn't grasp what she was talking about. "Live by the image, die by the image," she concluded. "They saw Nixon's speech merely as evidence of further faking. . . . I thought this reaction said something not about Nixon, but about us."⁷⁴

Greenfield had a point. Even as liberals saddled Nixon with a permanent image as Tricky Dick, they also revealed their distance from the Americans who shared his values. During Nixon's years, liberals adopted an elitist politics that relied upon executive branch bureaucrats and unelected federal judges to administer justice where the democratic masses could not be counted on to do so. The liberals could take pride in their noble and often brave positions. But those positions came at the price of distrusting the masses, Nixon's cherished Middle Americans. Their battles with Nixon forever tarnished their nemesis, but in isolating themselves politically, they hurt their own cause a lot as well.

3

The New Left Radicals: Nixon as Conspirator

Richard Nixon, the main villain of my political consciousness, . . . was finally biting that bullet he's been talking about all those years. . . . The truth was turning out to be even worse than my most "paranoid ravings" during that painful 1972 election.

—Hunter S. Thompson, *The Great Shark Hunt*¹

Nixon was sworn in as the nation's thirty-seventh president on January 20, 1969, amid chilly winds, roiling skies, and disorder in the streets. In the sanctums of the White House, Lyndon Johnson's aides, having long struggled to contain urban riots and a restive anti-war movement, left the new president a sheaf of executive orders declaring martial law, with only the date and the name of the city in question omitted. At the Capitol, Nixon joylessly delivered the speech he had waited eight years to give. He grimaced at the turmoil of the times, lamented a nation "torn by division, wanting unity," and expressed hope that his inauguration could start the healing.²

Many Americans, viewing Nixon as their populist spokesman, cheered him heartily, such as the teenagers of the Whittier High School marching band, who had flown in from Nixon's hometown. Others, including Democratic leaders, distrusted Nixon yet mustered respectful

NIXON'S SHADOW

The History of an Image

David Greenberg



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To my parents,
Maida and Robert Greenberg