Richard M. Nixon: JFK as “Cool Friend” in Public, Scapegoat in Private
By: Rio Bauce, Pitzer College

Throughout history, many public figures have frequently cited other popular presidents as a tool to gain bipartisan credibility or vex their political foes. After Lincoln’s death, Republicans and Democrats alike used his death to expand their own popularity. In the 1930s, FDR tried to turn the first Republican president into a Democratic hero. Republican Radicals tried to extend political franchise to Blacks by blaming Democrats for Lincoln’s death. Ironically, a contemporary Lincoln was not very popular. Some referred to him as a “first-rate second-rate man” and “the craftiest and most dishonest politician that ever disgraced an office in America.”¹

The case of John F. Kennedy is similar in many ways. Like Lincoln, Kennedy was subject to considerable criticism during his life yet became a national hero after his death at the hands of an assassin. His assassination is both the earliest event that most Americans can recall and also the most vivid memory that Americans have. JFK still has the highest approval rating of any presidency since the 1960s according to 2010 Gallup opinion polls. Kennedy received an 85 percent approval rating, while Nixon has the lowest, with 29 percent.² Nevertheless, Richard Nixon associated himself with John Kennedy for his emotion, style, and anti-communist rhetoric.

Campaign rhetoric aside, JFK and Nixon were both centrists and pragmatists.³ In the 1960s and 1970s, the Soviet threat loomed large. On this issue, both candidates,


during the 1960 election, wanted to appear tougher on communism. Both entered the political arena in the same year of 1946 right at the start of the Cold War. Both combined lofty oratory with gritty political tactics.

**Nixon’s and Kennedy: The Beginning**

In fact, after their election to Congress in 1946, *Time* magazine showcased the new freshmen House members with Kennedy on page one and Nixon on page two. The juxtaposition was a bit odd, since Richard Nixon’s early life predisposed him to dislike Kennedy. Nixon grew up as a brilliant, older son in a working class family. Since a young age, he had to work very hard. As an undergraduate, he earned the position of student government president. While at Whittier College, he organized a group called the Orthogonians, a men’s club of working class students, to challenge the Franklins, the upper-class men’s club. Classmate Dean Triggs came to Nixon after he won election to the class president and said that they should give the Franklins a “little competition,” as the only social club on campus. Even though Nixon denied allegations that he began the club based on social class distinctions, he described Orthogonians as a social club whose members “had to work their way through college.” Although he started this club in college, it has remained a sign of Nixon’s animosity toward the “elite.” Certainly, his major opponents for public office Jerry Voorhis and Helen Gahagan Douglas were

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members of the elite, broadly defined. And John F. Kennedy, a privileged politician who did not have to work hard for all his success, would also likely have joined the Franklinite club had he decided to attend Whittier.

Kennedy and Nixon had generally positive relations. A local party figure said that Kennedy and Nixon showed “genuine friendliness” toward one another. In addition, after Nixon won his race against Douglas, Kennedy told his students at Harvard that he was “pleased” with the Californian’s triumph. When Nixon was Vice President, his office was across the hall from the office of JFK. In 1954, when Kennedy had to undergo back surgery, Republicans wanted to seize the moment of a Democrat’s absence to take greater control of the Senate, as they were in danger of losing their hold in November (in fact, they did). Instead, Nixon did not allow this to which Jacqueline Kennedy remarked about Nixon, “There is no one my husband admires more.”

Nixon envied Kennedy’s image. The Kennedy family had a natural talent for building personal relationships. Nixon did not have as easy of a time. Nixon also noted Kennedy’s ability to court women and business leaders. Nixon’s approach was far more calculated, while JFK’s was more charming. This calculation of all his moves made Nixon very awkward, stiff, and perhaps self-conscious. Ellin Stein, a reporter from the Daily Telegraph, on a trip to Nixon’s law office in New York City, suspected that Nixon had a case of Asperger’s Syndrome. Perhaps this explains why Nixon seemed to only be

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8 Matthews, 167.
10 Matthews, 172.
11 Ellin Stein, “Richard Nixon – Connoisseur of Beautiful Women,” The Telegraph, January 23, 2009,
able to speak about politics and policy and had no talent for small talk. Perhaps this explains how he made lists of everything he talked about without being brief and made sure everything he said was in the proper order. Or maybe Nixon was just peculiar. Nonetheless, even Nixon’s closest advisors envied Kennedy. After the assassination of JFK, Ehrlichman noted that it had a deep shock to all “regardless of political orientation.”

Unfortunately, Kennedy did not share as much envy for his fellow statesman, Nixon. Then-Representative George Smathers remarked that Kennedy thought that Nixon was a “total opportunist,” while Nixon had told him that he admired JFK.

The Rift

Once JFK, or rather his father Joseph Kennedy Sr., set his sights on the presidency, a rift between Kennedy and Nixon began to open. In private, Kennedy said that Nixon was nice and able in private and that he had been a pleasure to work with on Capitol Hill. Nevertheless, Kennedy also remarked that Nixon “had a split personality...and that nobody liked him.” In order to boost Kennedy’s record, Sargent Shriver asked Adlai Stevenson to announce that JFK brought charges against the first Communist on trial despite evidence that Nixon should have received the honor. Stevenson had lost two presidential bids in 1952 and 1956. Although Stevenson wanted to enter the 1960 presidential contest, Kennedy had more support in the Democratic


13 Pietrusza, 46.

14 Pietrusza, 49.
Party. Even though relations between the two men were strained, Stevenson hated Nixon more. Nixon tried to connect Stevenson to the Soviet spy ring in his 1952 presidential bid: “Somebody had to testify for Alger Hiss, but you don't have to elect him President of the United States.”

In his unsuccessful bid for the vice presidency in 1956, Kennedy was not afraid to criticize Nixon in public appearances: “When Mr. Eisenhower talks about the party of the future, he is talking about the party of Richard Nixon. And I cannot believe that the majority of American voters would want to entrust the future to Mr. Nixon.” In private conversations, Kennedy would admit that Nixon was a role model and a very “smart rival.” In his acceptance speech for the Democratic nomination for President against Nixon, Kennedy questioned Nixon’s honesty saying, “We know that it will not be easy to campaign against a man who has spoken or voted on every known side of every known issue. Mr. Nixon may feel it is his turn now, after the New Deal and the Fair Deal--but before he deals, someone had better cut the cards.” Such comments hurt Nixon. Nixon counsel John Ehrlichman later reflected on the evolution of the Kennedy-Nixon relationship:

Well they started out as pretty good friends: they were young Congressmen together, they had mutual friends who brought them together, they spent time in the, in Florida together; and then Jack Kennedy and his father decided that he would run for President, in place of his deceased brother. At that point they parted

company - and they became rivals. Richard Nixon liked Jack Kennedy, as a matter of fact, but he had no use for his brothers, he had no use for his father, and all his, all the time I knew him - from 1959 on - the Kennedys were his sworn enemies. 18

During the 1960 campaign and its immediate aftermath, the two men maintained a semblance of cordiality. *Time* released a rare account of Nixon’s attitude toward Kennedy after the election. After the vote, many speculated whether Nixon was going to demand a recount in Illinois. While he was resting with family in Miami, he received a call from Joe Kennedy asking for the two to get together. After consulting with Herbert Hoover and Dwight Eisenhower, Nixon agreed. When JFK called him to propose that he come meet Nixon in Miami, Nixon offered to travel and meet Kennedy: “After all, that's the proper thing to do in view of last Tuesday's results.” 19

In the years to follow, however, elements of contempt and resentment increasingly permeated the Nixon-Kennedy relationship. Notwithstanding his decision to forgo a recount, Nixon believed that JFK had stolen the election with the help of Chicago Mayor Richard Daley. Through stuffing ballot boxes, Daley and JFK supposedly rigged the Illinois vote. Daley even did not allow certain wards to vote as the race seemed that it would be close. 20 Although this is possible, it is unlikely that it would have reversed the outcome. The official results were that Kennedy had 303 electoral votes against Nixon’s

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219 votes. Had Nixon won Illinois, JFK would still have had 276 votes against Nixon with 246 votes.

Also, Nixon thought that Kennedy harassed him and his family in the early 1960s, using the IRS and the Justice Department. This belief stuck with Nixon into his White House years. In a conversation with John Ehrlichman, he suggested that it would be rough justice to audit Democrats:

**President Nixon:** Why are--are we going after their tax returns? I--you know what I mean? There's a lot of gold in them thar hills.

**Ehrlichman:** It worries people, [unclear]--

**President Nixon:** You remember in 1962, do you remember what they did to me in California? Now that was a crock. Those sons of bitches came out [unclear] and I find out they owe me more money, in fact, my returns had been so circumspect. I was furious. I don't know.\(^{21}\)

The mention of the year 1962 was an allusion to his ill-fated campaign for governor of California against Pat Brown. After losing, he made bitter remarks at what he called his “last press conference.” The incident caused Kennedy to question Nixon’s sanity. He had this (surreptitiously recorded) phone conversation with Brown:

**President Kennedy:** I’ll tell you this, you reduced him to the nut house.

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Pat Brown: Listen, but you gave me instructions and I follow your orders [unclear].

President Kennedy: [Chuckling] I understand. But God, that last farewell speech of his . . .

Pat Brown: Wasn’t that terrible?

President Kennedy: Well, no but it shows . . . [needle skips] . . . what’s going to happen [needle skips] out there?

Pat Brown: I don’t see how he can ever recover. [Needle skips] the leaders.

President Kennedy: Yeah.

Pat Brown: [Goodwin] Knight walked out on him, [unclear: Shell] told me [needle skips]. This is a peculiar fellow. [Needle skips] I really think he’s psychotic. He’s an able man, but he’s nuts.

President Kennedy: Yeah.22

JFK Praised in Public

Despite mixed feelings on both sides of the relationship, Nixon remained respectful of Kennedy in public. In his memoir Six Crises, Nixon told how he was speaking with Kennedy about his ambitions to publish a book, to which Kennedy

responded that every man should write a book for “mental discipline” and “it tends to elevate him in popular esteem to the respected status of an ‘intellectual.’” Nixon also remarks that Kennedy is “so distinguished a member” of literary ranks.23 While Nixon quickly said that Kennedy was not his greatest influence for his book (he says that Adela Rogers St. Johns, a friend and American journalist gave him the most inspiration), this reflects the larger theme that Nixon admired Kennedy but was quick to give him too much praise. With Kennedy as the “Cool Kid,” Nixon tried to improve his own image through association with JFK but also wanted to avoid giving JFK too much praise.

To Nixon, JFK was a friend and an enemy, a person that Nixon envied and wanted to associate with but also had much contempt. Did the use of the JFK image help or hurt Nixon? The answer is complicated.

Since the Johnson and Nixon presidencies were so close to JFK and the fact that they served time together in Congress has shown that they are the most likely presidents to cite JFK but for different reasons. Johnson was a tricky case because he was never close with the Kennedy family. In fact, Robert Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson hated each other.24 JFK reluctantly asked Johnson to serve on the 1960 ticket only after Johnson had not received the presidential nomination and JFK figured that Johnson would refuse.25 In addition, Johnson too obviously tried to court Jacqueline, offering to appoint her ambassador to France or Mexico. Although the Johnson presidency was more successful because of his use of the JFK image, he failed in Vietnam. While it is unclear whether

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Johnson’s attempts to invoke the image of JFK were sincere, his use seemed too obvious and sometimes irrelevant. For that reason, the use of the JFK image gave Johnson more a status as an interloper or usurper of the presidency.

During the 1968 campaign, Nixon alluded to Kennedy, in part to draw unfavorable comparisons with Johnson. On the eve of his inauguration, Kennedy said that “since the time of Thomas Jefferson, the Democratic Party has been identified with the pursuit of excellence.” Just as Kennedy, Nixon also spoke of a pursuit of excellence: “During the stewardship of the present administration … the pursuit of excellence has been replaced by an acceptance of the second rate.” He also reiterated Kennedy from his inaugural address: “We should never fear to negotiate, and never negotiate from fear.” In a press conference about the Selective Service, Nixon used a phrase that Kennedy had immortalized in a 1962 press conference about military service: “Life is unfair.” Nevertheless, like Kennedy, Nixon also emphasized in their speeches the “valuable function” that those who enlist in the military provide. Nixon used this phrase to support his plan to turn over the offensive in the Vietnam War to the South Vietnamese army and end U.S. involvement in Vietnam. Nixon bragged in an address to Department


of Justice officials that his Attorney General John Mitchell, also his campaign manager in 1968 and later in 1972, was the commanding officer of JFK during the Second World War.\(^{30}\)

In public, Nixon admired quoted JFK. He did so for several reasons. One, since JFK was a popular president, Nixon wanted to quiet ideas that he never would have won the presidency had JFK and Robert Kennedy not been assassinated. Two, despite negative feelings, Nixon also had a warm spot for JFK. As mentioned earlier, Nixon envied his ability to woo the American public through the media; Nixon viewed John Kennedy as the “cool kid” and wanted to associate himself with such company to dispel rumors that he was not very fun.

Nixon sometimes effectively associated himself with his former counterpart and sometimes he did not. During his first inaugural address, Nixon paraphrased Kennedy. For example, he made reference to Kennedy’s new frontier: “What kind of nation we will be - what kind of world we will live in...is ours to determine by our actions and our choices.”\(^{31}\) Nixon tried to unite the country after the bitter fighting during the Johnson years. In fact, his address contained the word “we” sixty-six different times. During his 1974 State of the Union speech, Nixon tried to associate himself with Kennedy as an example of how members of Congress can work hard and become president. He also tried to associate himself with Kennedy as promoter of peace. Nixon said in his address:

> It was 27 years ago that John F. Kennedy and I sat in this Chamber, as freshmen Congressmen, hearing our first State of the Union address delivered by Harry

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Truman. I know from my talks with him, as members of the Labor Committee on which we both served, that neither of us then even dreamed that either one or both might eventually be standing in this place that I now stand in now and that he once stood in, before me.\(^{32}\)

Nixon associated himself with Kennedy under the larger context of how ordinary Americans can achieve great things. Nixon also liked to mention that JFK and him both served on the House Committee on Education and Labor. During remarks to the House chamber while he was president, Nixon remarked about his voting record: “But more important, the record will show that John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon--on those great issues in that 80th Congress and in the 81st Congress, involving security of the Nation, involving foreign policy--voted together.”\(^{33}\) Although it was not necessary to utter the name of John Kennedy, JFK was so popular in the minds of Americans that this imagery seemed appropriate.

During the 1972 campaign, the Democratic Party nominated South Dakota Senator George McGovern for president. McGovern took strongly progressive stands on a range of issues, and his dovishness on foreign policy gave Nixon an opportunity to suggest that the Democratic Party had strayed from JFK’s commitment to national assertiveness and military strength. He recalled that, as House members, both he and Kennedy had supported aid to Greece and Turkey to fight communism:

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It was a hard vote for those of us who were Republicans. There was a Democratic President. We had just won the House of Representatives. There were great partisan appeals to us to vote the party and not vote the country. I looked at the vote as it occurred and— it is recorded in the Congressional Record— just a few days ago. I saw the names of those who voted in the affirmative, voted with President Truman. There was a young Congressman from Texas who later became President of the United States, Lyndon Johnson. He was 40 years of age then. There was a young Congressman, a freshman Congressman from Massachusetts who later became President of the United States, John Kennedy. He was 31 years of age. And I am proud to say there was a young Congressman from California, who was 34 years of age, who later became President of the United States— but all put America above their party.\(^\text{34}\)

Connally’s role as head of “Democrats for Nixon” had a Kennedy connection, too. As most voters could remember in 1972, Connally rode with Kennedy in the motorcade in Dallas when JFK was shot.

During the 1973 inaugural address, Nixon, in reference to JFK’s famous “ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country” that signified the importance of collectivism and community to reach greatness, remarked, “In our own lives, let each of us ask not just what will government do for me, but what can I do for myself?” On the surface, Nixon used Kennedy’s words to drive home the Republican

message of personal responsibility and small government. Although the sentiments were different, the similar words made the parallels clear. Nixon’s speechwriter Raymond Price remarked that he and Nixon wanted to have his speech make a contrast with Kennedy’s famous diction from his inaugural that would help advance the policy goal of smaller government.35

In another instance, Nixon tried to draw another contrast: “The time has passed when America will make every other nation’s conflict our own, or make even our responsibility, or presume to tell the people of other nations how to manage their own affairs.” This diction is in response to John Kennedy’s inaugural address: “Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and the success of liberty.” During his second inaugural address, Nixon was attempting to present himself as an able statesman.

**JFK Blamed in Private**

In private, Nixon vented his ambivalence about Kennedy. Nixon thought that he was much more qualified for the presidency in 1960 and that JFK had used superficial tricks to win the election. Furthermore, Nixon believed that Kennedy not only further involved the United States in Vietnam but also gave off the perception that he wanted to promote peace. Tapes released from Watergate show that Nixon wanted to undercut Kennedy’s image. Pentagon Papers showed that Kennedy made the decision to plan a

coup against Ngo Dinh Diem, leader of the South Vietnamese in October 1963.\textsuperscript{36} Nixon discovered Kennedy’s rash decision while in the Oval Office on July 1, 1971: “Kennedy decided to go forward and got us involved, and it shows that Kennedy was the one who got us in the damn war. We got the Kennedys in this thing now.”\textsuperscript{37} Nixon wanted to declassify the CIA documents and distribute them to the press immediately. He remained determined to destroy the Kennedy legacy in public even after the Watergate fiasco (he even said about Kennedy’s Berlin speech: “Kennedy got the Berliners all excited and then he let them down.”\textsuperscript{38}). The September 8th, 1972 tapes show that CIA Director Richard Helms was not releasing the documents to the administration because of sensitivity issues. Even after Watergate, Nixon still wanted his team to nail Kennedy.

Toward the end of the famous “smoking gun” conversation, Chief of Staff Bob Haldeman said that Helms was investigating this because of all the money involved. In frustration, Nixon says, “Can you imagine what Kennedy would have done with that money?” in reference to the Watergate investigation money.\textsuperscript{39} As mentioned earlier, Nixon thought that Kennedy had no problem with hardball political tactics.\textsuperscript{40}

Nixon was not that far off. Recent reports came out that Kennedy, in fact, directed the IRS to conduct investigations into right-wing tax-exempt companies that were really

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\textsuperscript{38} William Safire, \textit{Before the Fall: An Inside View of the Pre-Watergate White House} (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1975), 153.
\textsuperscript{40} John A. Andrew III, \textit{Power to Destroy: The Political Uses of the IRS from Kennedy to Nixon} (Westport: Ivan R. Dee, 2002).
\end{flushright}
embezzling money.\textsuperscript{41} In order to get revenge on his detractors, Kennedy spoke with IRS Commissioner Caplin to investigate these groups. Although Caplin noted that Kennedy was “handsoff,” he admitted that the IRS began to also investigate liberal groups so that it was a fair investigation. Some of the liberal groups included the Fair Play Cuba Committee, a pro-Castro organization that Kennedy’s assassin Lee Harvey Oswald held membership in. A 1976 book \textit{Conversations with Kennedy} showed that the 35th President had shared the tax information about conservative billionaires J. Paul Getty and H.R. Hunt with the author. Journalist Ben Bradlee, the author of the book, later became editor of the \textit{Washington Post} when the paper investigated Nixon in the Watergate scandal. Similar to Watergate, Kennedy launched a covert operation to investigate his detractors. At his death, the IRS was set to launch inquiries into 10,000 companies.

Nixon thought that Lyndon Johnson and Kennedy had done much worse things than he himself had done. He also thought that Senator Edward Kennedy was trying to use Watergate to ruin him. During the campaign, Ted Kennedy made a false statement that Nixon was as far ahead of JFK during the 1960 election as he was now ahead of George McGovern during the 1972 election. During the election, Nixon confessed later that he thought that he probably could not beat Ted Kennedy had the Democrats nominated him because of all the “emotional elements.”\textsuperscript{42} During the Watergate investigation, Archibald Cox, research director for JFK’s 1960 campaign, was the special prosecutor.


\textsuperscript{42} Matthews, 317.
After Watergate in summer of 1973, Vice President Spiro Agnew resigned in disgrace over fraud and tax corruption. In his place, Minority Leader Gerald Ford of Michigan took the vice presidency and after Richard Nixon’s resignation in 1974, Gerald Ford ascended to the presidency without winning the electoral college for president or vice president.

In his post-presidential years, Nixon, in order to repair his image from Watergate, tried to associate himself with JFK. In his memoirs, Nixon mentioned JFK almost seventy times in his 1,000-page memoir. Nixon bragged about how Kennedy supported his election efforts in 1950 against Representative Helen Gahagan Douglas, the former actress that ran for the Democratic nomination. Kennedy came to meet with Nixon and handed him an envelope with $1,000. In the aftermath, Nixon mentioned that Kennedy had told professors and students at Harvard that he was very happy that Nixon won against Ms. Douglas. Earlier in the memoir, Nixon remarked that many sitting Senators typically wish both candidates well. Nevertheless, he said that many House Democrats hoped that he could beat Ms. Douglas. Shortly thereafter in the memoir, Nixon remarked how happy he was that his former House colleague, John Kennedy, wrote him a note by hand that praised him for his vice presidential nomination in 1952. Engulfed in a larger discussion surrounding his nomination and the upcoming campaign, this letter seemed out-of-place. Aside from making him look “cooler” and a “bipartisan,” the letter did not tell much about the campaign. It looks more like it was used to elicit a stronger connection with Kennedy.

44 Nixon, 91.
The Ford Connection

Although many credit Ford with a short presidency, he served in the executive branch longer than Kennedy as vice president from 1973 to 1974 and president from 1974 to 1977. Ford is most famous for giving a presidential pardon to Nixon for his crimes during Watergate. Ford’s most obvious connection with Kennedy was after the assassination. After Kennedy’s death, incoming-president Lyndon B. Johnson appointed Ford to the Warren Commission. During his time on the commission, Ford was considered an FBI informant with strong ties to the agency and reported back to authorities on commission members that were weary of the FBI statement that Oswald acted as an independent shooter. A memo shows that Ford told FBI Assistant Director Cartha DeLoach that those who believed that the FBI was wrong would “of course...represent no problem,” but that the issue would likely be discussed more.45

While Ford had little personal connection to Kennedy, they did serve together in the House from 1949 until 1953. Nevertheless, the Kennedy image was not very necessary for Ford to invoke. Both Johnson and Nixon had known Kennedy well and had to suffer the aftermath of American sadness. Ford did not even run for election for either position he held in the executive branch. Therefore, he seemed unaffected by the Kennedy mystique and Camelot. As a short-term president, he did not need to invoke the Kennedy image during the Republican contest in 1976 since he was already more moderate in the party than the conservative Reagan. During the general election against Carter, Ford unfortunately was associated with the wrong image. Famous for his

presidential pardon of Richard Nixon, Ford took a hit at the polls as connected to the Watergate scandal and the tainted Nixon image. Indirectly, the Nixon image was mixed in its success as using the Kennedy image. Therefore, with too many degrees disconnected, Ford did not use the Kennedy image at all but had the remains of a corrupt Nixon image. Ford had met Kennedy in 1949 in the House and although both men had different styles, Ford liked him. When he heard that Kennedy had been assassinated, Ford remarked, “I felt very sad that his career ended in this tragedy.” Nevertheless, similar to Johnson and Nixon, Ford did not think that JFK’s legislative record was anything to write home about. In the end, Ford believed that Nixon’s presidency had much more bearing on his own than Kennedy’s.

Selected Bibliography


46 Henggeler, 125.


