Reviews: 'Being Nixon,' 'One Man Against the World'

By Scott Porch

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Although four decades have passed since he became the first president of the United States to resign from office, Richard Nixon has been the subject of more than a dozen new histories and biographies in the last few years. The renewed interest is the result of historical records that have recently become available, including 340 additional hours of Nixon's recorded White House conversations and many newly declassified records from the Vietnam War.

The basic contours of Nixon's political story are the same — a narrow loss in the 1960 presidential election, a comeback from the political wilderness to win in 1968, a landslide re-election four years later, major diplomatic and domestic policy achievements, and the downward spiral of Watergate that ended his presidency — but the trove of new archival material has brought a depth of understanding and colorful new details to our understanding of Nixon's management of the Vietnam War and his role in the Watergate cover-up.

The Watergate story is the apex event of two new books that take very different approaches to illuminating Nixon's path. Former Newsweek editor Evan Thomas' "Being Nixon: A Man Divided" is a full-life biography — and the new gold standard for a single-volume take on Nixon — that places a significant emphasis on anecdotes and stories that reveal Nixon's complex and neurotic psychological state. "One Man Against the World: The Tragedy of Richard Nixon" by former New York Times reporter Tim Weiner is a history of Nixon's paranoid White House that draws connections between his handling of the Vietnam War and the illegal domestic spying that brought down his presidency.

Thomas' "Being Nixon" is a biography of eloquence and breadth, a whistle-stop tour of Nixon's life that, despite its more than 600 pages, seldom overstays its welcome or wanders off into unnecessary detours. While some worthwhile chapters of Nixon's life are hurried or even ignored — there's too little about the 1960 campaign, almost nothing about Nixon's surprise selection of Spiro Agnew as his running mate in 1968 and nothing at all about Nixon's long post-presidency fight to keep the bulk of the White House tapes from becoming public — no single volume about Nixon's long and interesting life could be so comprehensive.

Weiner's "One Man Against the World" is more of an ensemble drama with Nixon as the villain — or "anti-hero" in today's TV-speak — whose cover-up of the Watergate break-in was among his milder misdeeds. Before Nixon ever took office, Weiner writes, he had broken campaign finance laws by accepting foreign contributions and broken diplomatic laws by trying to scuttle a possible peace deal in Vietnam to deny a political boost to Vice President Hubert Humphrey in the 1968 election. (LBJ knew — "This is treason," Weiner quotes LBJ as saying — but stayed quiet for fear of destabilizing the presidency before Nixon had even taken office.)

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Richard Nixon learned tenacity from failure. In high school, he was beat out for student body president by a more popular kid who entered the race shortly before the election. In college, he didn't get into the popular fraternity and he spent two years trying to convince his future wife to go on a first date. After law school, he was passed over by all the prestigious New York firms. He was nearly dumped as Eisenhower's running mate in 1952 and 1956. In

1960, he lost a razor-thin presidential election, and two years later he lost badly in a run for governor of California.

Nixon was also a basket of neuroses — painfully shy, socially awkward, short-fused, approval-seeking, clumsy, prone to insomnia and flat-out weird. As a law student at Duke, he cheered so wildly at the school's football games that other students would sit nearby just to watch him. As president, he tried to keep formal dinners short and casual conversations to no more than five minutes. He had difficulty operating his Oval Office phone (which is why the White House taping system was voice-activated). He so frequently dropped medals during military ceremonies that his staff changed the medals' pins to clips.

Thomas, a former Newsweek reporter and editor whose last two books were about Bobby Kennedy and Dwight Eisenhower, describes his approach as "an effort to understand what it was like to actually be Nixon." He examines Nixon's life and White House through memoirs and oral histories of advisers and contemporaries, Nixon's own writings and White House tapes, and the exhaustive diaries of Nixon's chief of staff, H.R. Haldeman.

"Being Nixon" is certainly no revisionist biography of the former president as sensitive, empathetic or even likable, but Thomas succeeds at broadening his familiar political story to include psychological and emotional dimensions. Thomas provides enough evidence of embarrassing slights and moments of comic awkwardness to leaven Nixon's better known cynicism and brutishness. Thomas paints him with more texture than previous biographers.

"Nixon's essential nature remains elusive in part because he took steps to hide who he was — from the public and his family, and, perhaps, at a conscious level, even from himself," Thomas writes. "Nixon had to overcome his extreme shyness, his essential aloneness, to meet the demands of vote-getting and projecting a public persona in a mass-media democracy. There is something undeniably brave about his determination to convert his insecurities from debilitating weakness to propulsive power."

Thomas finds no Rosebud, no new understanding of why Nixon would recklessly torpedo his own presidency, but raises the possibility that Nixon had learned of Kennedy's "dirty tricks" in the 1960 election — like paying black preachers to deliver votes, which Kennedy apparently did — and decided early in the 1968 election that winning required such subterfuge.

The real Nixon — if there ever was a real Nixon — was too guarded and lacking in self-reflection to ever explain why he did the things he did. Why pursue illegal bombings in Cambodia during the Vietnam War and then hide the evidence from Congress? Why push the IRS to investigate his political enemies well after his 1972 re-election was assured and illegally wiretap journalists, United States senators and even his own White House staff? Thomas approaches Nixon the man the way a parabola approaches a line — closer but never quite intersecting.

Maybe, as Thomas points out, there simply isn't a coherent explanation for what made Nixon tick: "The Watergate Nixon is generally portrayed as scheming and Machiavellian by the press, and the White House tapes provide no shortage of material to buttress this view. But the overwhelming impression left by listening to the tapes is of a man who is not clever, who is all too human — who rambles, gets lost, changes his mind, knows too much and too little all at once."

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Weiner's "One Man Against the World" sees Nixon driven not by a complex psyche but as a pol who understood power and wielded it like a blowtorch against anyone who crossed him. "Richard Nixon was never at peace," Weiner writes. "A darker spirit animated him — malevolent and violent, driven by anger and an insatiable appetite for revenge. At his worst he stood on the brink of madness." His madness was deepened by insomnia, sleeping pills and scotch — and more so as both the Vietnam War and the Watergate crisis expanded.

The first half of the book is a White House-centric history of the Vietnam War during Nixon's presidency, and it is an eye-opener. As Nixon's presidency began in 1969, Americans had already had their fill of Vietnam and were protesting in the streets and on college campuses. Nixon decided early on to try to bring the conflict to a quick end with a show of military force against the Viet Cong.

Vietnam is a long, narrow country shaped like a sea horse with its thin southern tail wrapped around Cambodia. During the Vietnam War, the Viet Cong staged their incursions into South Vietnam through Cambodia, which was neutral but too weak to secure its own borders. Nixon ordered 2.7 million tons of bombs dropped on Cambodia from March 1969 to August 1973 — "exceeding the tonnage of all Allied bombing during World War II, including Hiroshima and Nagasaki," Weiner notes, and killing as many as 50,000 to 150,000 Cambodian civilians — which he hid from the American people, Congress and much of his own administration by falsifying records in violation of U.S. and international law.

To protect himself against leaks to the press, Nixon used the FBI to bug the telephones of at least 13 U.S. government officials and four newspaper reporters, and the FBI sent him daily summaries of the recorded conversations. Nixon used the National Security Agency to maintain a watch list for illegal surveillance of as many as 1,600 Americans — a fact that was only declassified in 2013. Nixon ordered FBI surveillance on Ted Kennedy and Ed Muskie, senators who were potential Democratic candidates for president in 1972.

And, of course, when a wiretap or surveillance wouldn't do, Nixon — or subordinates acting on behalf of the White House or his 1972 re-election campaign — would order burglary operations. ("Goddamn it, get in and get those files," Nixon says on tape of one such break-in. "Blow the safe and get it.") Although there are still uncertainties and ambiguities about who knew what and when about the five men who broke into the Democratic National Committee's headquarters at the Watergate Hotel complex on June 17, 1972, this was not uncharted territory for Nixon. The cover-up began initially to hold the line until after the 1972 election.

"All these men told so many lies in the weeks and months ahead," Weiner writes of Nixon and his closest advisers, "that it took two years of federal investigations, congressional hearings, and criminal trials to establish the essential elements of the Watergate story." Two years later, Nixon's complicity in the cover-up would end his presidency.

Scott Porch is writing a book about social upheaval in the 1960s and '70s.

"Being Nixon"

By Evan Thomas, Random House, 623 pages, $35

"One Man Against the World"

By Tim Weiner, Henry Holt, 370 pages, $30