

Nixon Postmortem

By BARRY SCHWARTZ and LORI HOLYFIELD

ABSTRACT: Cultural theories of communication and media events transcend naive ideas about the media as mere transmitters of information; however, they attend insufficiently to information itself. Richard Nixon's eulogists outraged his critics as they tried to bring the moral, emotional, and informational aspects of the funeral into balance. Placing the Watergate scandal in the context of Nixon's progressive administration, the eulogists not only affirmed national values and the dignity of the presidency but also provided positive information about Nixon that would have had less impact if communicated outside a symbol-laden state funeral setting. Thus, the Nixon funeral shows why the informational function of media events must occupy a more central place in communication theory.

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RECENT work on state ritual includes analyses of inaugurations, coronations, holidays, parades, festivals, rallies, pilgrimage, drama, and music (for recent examples of this massive literature, see Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983; Spillman 1997; for a summary, see Gusfield and Michalowicz 1984). As mass communications increase exposure to these kinds of events, new questions arise about their role as integrative forces in society.

Impressed with Emile Durkheim's treatment ([1915] 1965) of the symbolic order, which "operates not to provide information but confirmation" of the underlying scheme of things, James Carey ([1975] 1989) regards news watching and reading less as a means of learning about the world than a means of affirming it. News works as high drama (19-21). Along this Durkheimian line, Roger Silverstone (1988) construes television as a focus for the "mobilization of collective energy and enthusiasm" and "palaeosymbolic meanings" (25, 43).

Nowhere can Carey's "cultural approach to communication" be applied more usefully than to death and funeral rites. In this perspective, funeral rites are understood as ways of draining off emotion, sustaining morale in the context of loss, promoting consensus and solidarity, imposing upon the public's notice the fact of a death that it might otherwise minimize, or affirming the dignity of the status occupied by the deceased. But Carey's approach, like Durkheim's ([1915] 1965; see also Hertz 1960; Warner 1959; Greenberg and Parker

1965; Metcalf and Huntington 1991; Schwartz 1991), is too pat, for the consequences of communication, in Clifford Geertz's words, "seem adventitious, the accidental byproducts of an essentially nonrational, nearly automatic expressive process initially pointed in another direction" (1973, 206). Communication's envisioned consequences, on the other hand, carry their own mysteries and warrant examination.

The cultural approach to communication embodies the revenge of emotion upon fact. Cultural communication theorists, while seeking to disclose the symbolic components of public events, have never denied the significance of their contents, nor have they denied that factual particularity can impassion just as emotion can enhance factual relevance. Their emphasis, however, moves us from naive ideas about the media as mere transmitters of information to a cathetic conception that gives information less emphasis than it deserves. A cathetic conception of ritual focuses too sharply on what Edward Sapir (1930) termed "condensation symbols"—emblems and ceremonial forms that reach deep into the nonrational, emotional levels of consciousness—and disposes of "referential symbols" (492-93), representing objective knowledge, including knowledge conveyed by ritually framed speech acts, as being peripheral to rituals' ostensibly true (self-affirmative) function. The present study, using President Richard Nixon's funeral as a vehicle, addresses this less clarified aspect of state ritual and seeks to achieve a

more balanced understanding by broadening, not abandoning, the cultural approach to communication.

MEDIA RITUAL AND REPUTATION

The American people's assessment of Richard Nixon's presidency (January 1969–August 1974) is too differentiated to be based on nonrational sentiment alone. Between 1976 and 1983, 11 Gallup surveys showed Nixon's positive rating increasing from 30 to 43 percent. In 7 Harris surveys from 1976 to 1988, he was compared to presidents since Franklin Roosevelt, and on the management of foreign policy he ranked first in all but one. In June 1994 the Hart and Teeter survey asked respondents whether Nixon's presidency was, on balance, good or bad for America. Sixty-six percent responded good; 20 percent, bad; 6 percent, mixed; 8 percent expressed no opinion. The July 1994 Yankelovitch survey showed 12 percent of adult Americans rating Nixon as one of the greatest presidents; 32 percent, a good president; 36 percent, average; and 15 percent, poor. Five percent had no opinion (Roper Center 1997).

On the other hand, the 1976 Harris poll revealed 63 percent of the respondents as naming Nixon the most immoral postwar president. In 1988, the percentage designating Nixon the least moral dropped to 48 percent, but it was still far higher than the percentage naming any other president. In 1995, the Michaels poll showed 57 percent believing Nixon's influence on American moral values to be negative;

17 percent, positive. In the same year, 1995, the CBS Poll showed 2 percent of the respondents naming Nixon as the best of all American presidents; 19 percent, as the worst (Roper Center 1997). Thus, by the time Richard Nixon died, the American people had come to imagine him a technically competent but morally imperfect man, one who had served his country well but had set the wrong moral example.

Public opinion of Nixon was affected not only by his achievements but also by the activities of "reputational entrepreneurs" (Fine 1996), including the Nixon presidential library and museum staff. Leaving aside Nixon's adversaries as well as supporters, however, our concern is to know how his mourning rites might have enlarged or made more relevant the positive aspects of both his character and his presidency.

The Nixon funeral was at best a mini-media event, for it possessed none of the emotional resonance of grand funerals like President Kennedy's and Princess Diana's; still, it was a serious affair warranting front-page headlines and special comment in both the visual and printed media. Media events, whatever their scope, exploit an "anthropology of ceremony" (Dayan and Katz 1992, 1-2) to construe public events as articulators of consensus (197; see also Dayan and Katz 1988). The televising of such events interrupts the rhythm of mundane life, creates vast audiences, affirms moral ideals, creates fellow feeling, connects the center and periphery of the society, and defines its moral boundaries. Focus-

ing on the unintended consequences of events, Dayan and Katz (1992, 188-217, esp. 195-98) exemplify Philip Elliott's earlier (1982) claim that "irrationalism is a general feature of popular journalism which is to be found in particularly striking form in these [media] rituals" (129; see also Edelman 1988).

Since oratory is a constituent of media rituals—from presidential inaugurations to holiday observances and official mourning—Michael Gilmore's conception (1978) of the eulogy informs and extends the cultural approach to communication. Funeral eulogies, as instances of ritual speech, are, according to Gilmore, symbolic biographies: "By treating the dead as a kind of cultural ideal, the eulogist seeks to compose the collective biography of an entire people. Thus the true subject of the eulogy [is] the speaker and his community rather than the character and career of the person nominally portrayed" (131).

A PROGRESSIVE PRESIDENCY

Eulogies may be screens on which representatives of a community project their own needs and concerns, but they also provide standpoints from which people are exposed to otherwise inaccessible information about the deceased. If eulogies are necessarily biased, they cannot be spun out of thin air. Pro-Nixon eulogists drew on facts to "de-romanticize evil" (Ducharme and Fine 1995, 1326-28)—to make him a lifelike man rather than a larger-than-life demon.

Richard Nixon had distinguished himself as an effective congressman before serving as Dwight Eisenhower's vice president from 1952 to 1960. He then ran against John Kennedy in November 1960 and was defeated in one of the closest elections in history. After suffering a second defeat as candidate for governor of California, he ran for the presidency again in 1968, defeating Hubert Humphrey narrowly. In 1972, after the Watergate break-in, Nixon beat George McGovern in a landslide. Two years later, after unsuccessful efforts to conceal his Watergate role, he resigned the presidency.

Foreign relations constituted the most visible arena of Richard Nixon's presidential achievement. Most Americans, opposing George McGovern's characterization of the Vietnam war as a national sin, supported Nixon's effort to end it honorably, that is, without "divisive recrimination" that would "scar our spirit as a people" (Morris 1996, 216, 217). Although Nixon's delay in terminating the war was controversial, he was admired for establishing regular relations with China, improving relations with the Soviet Union, and forming evenhanded Middle East policies, even while facing down the Soviet Union and supplying Israel directly during its perilous Yom Kippur War (when every European nation denied the United States access to its airfields).

On domestic matters, Democratic Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan asserts, Richard Nixon led the most progressive of all postwar administrations (Wicker 1991, 144; see also

Barone 1990; White 1982). In the context of severe economic problems, most acute during his second term in office (inflation, an oil embargo, and a weakening stock market), Nixon broke with conservative tradition by establishing the Environmental Protection Agency, and he initiated legislation to control noise, protect scenic rivers, expand national parks, improve water quality, maintain coastlines, and prohibit ocean pollution.

Nixon had reduced and eliminated many of Lyndon B. Johnson's programs, but his goal was to fine-tune, not abolish, the Great Society. He doubled the food stamp program from \$340 million to \$640 million during his very first year in office. The amount of Aid to Families with Dependent Children tripled from 1970 to the end of his presidency. The Nixon administration also started the War on Cancer, increased public health and occupational and consumer product safety, increased supports for subsidized housing, and expanded aid to the blind, disabled, and aged. Nixon's total social service budget grew from \$55 billion in 1970 to \$132 billion in 1975, and, while increasing the Social Security tax, he also increased domestic spending generally from 28 to 40 percent of the gross national product while decreasing defense spending from 40 to 26 percent. When the economy turned downward, he rejected advice to allow the market to regulate itself and instituted wage and price controls.

Nixon also instituted federal supports for elementary and secondary education, quadrupled federal support for the arts, established the National Student Loan Association

for students from low-income families, the Career Education Program for community colleges, and the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Nixon gave Native Americans unprecedented assistance, from the establishment of legal rights and favorable economic legislation to material relief. In addition, he strengthened measures against school segregation and sex discrimination by increasing the staff of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission from 359 in 1969 to 1640 in 1972. During this same period, 1969-72, set-aside contracts for minority businesses rose from \$8 million to \$243 million. Grants, loans, and guarantees to minorities and women increased during this same period from \$69 to \$472 million. (See Aitken 1993; Burke and Burke 1974; Hoff 1994; Whitaker 1976, 1997.)

The policies of a Democratic president, specifically Hubert Humphrey and George McGovern, would likely have been more liberal than Nixon's. However, the Nixon administration, although acting in its own political interest (as Schuman et al. [1997], among scores of others, have noted), was fundamentally compassionate, concerned for the well-being of the nation, and attentive to issues of social justice as well as the production and distribution of wealth. President Nixon had violated his oath of office and was capable of private cruelty, but he acted on his statements about political adversaries infrequently. Nixonian discourse, even when preserved dramatically on tape, was less significant than Nixonian practice (Swidler 1997).

FUNERAL AT YORBA LINDA

The meaning of practices is not always straightforward. This is why Emile Durkheim's belief that mourning is obligatory ([1915] 1965, 443) is an insufficient starting point for a theory of funeral practices. It is well to say that mourning is a social obligation when the deceased is one whose death is regretted or even accepted with indifference, but what of cases in which the object of mourning can be treated with neither indifference nor grief? What if the deceased is a man whose crimes against the people are widely known and condemned? Moreover, what if this same man is too important and his impact on his nation and on history too significant to ignore? What kind of duty does the group then impose? What values would public mourning then affirm? How, then, does a nation ritually embrace the deceased leader it has decisively expelled.

Richard Nixon's funeral was a neutralization ceremony consisting of the ritual repair of wounds induced by semi-religious censure and degradation (Alexander 1988). Nixon himself understood the identity-conferring power of ritual. Designing parts of his own funeral rites, he omitted their highlight: the Capitol visitation ceremony. No political figure can receive a greater national honor than to be placed in state in the U.S. Capitol Rotunda, but Nixon knew the press would compare him with the unpopular president—Johnson—and contrast him to the popular presidents—Kennedy and Eisenhower—who had lain there. He therefore arranged for his body to be taken directly to the

Richard Nixon Library and Birthplace in Yorba Linda, California.

The funeral at Yorba Linda took place on Wednesday, 27 April 1994, at 4 p.m. Pacific time and appeared on television in the east at 7 p.m. So scheduled, it did not interrupt prime-time television viewing. All major networks carried the ceremony live; some repeated it later in the evening. Three-quarters (73 percent) of the adult population, according to a post-funeral survey, followed the event closely. Most of these viewers understood its anomalous character, for 91 percent correctly identified Nixon with the "Watergate scandal" (Roper Center 1997). However, this funeral's symbolic display and eulogical oratory recontextualized the scandal, put it in a broader and clearer light. The impressiveness of Richard Nixon's funeral rites was instrumental in making viewers receptive to the information his eulogists were about to deliver.

The funeral, following Defense Department protocol, began with the bearing of the president's coffin to its catafalque by a military honor guard. Henry Kissinger, National Security Council adviser and secretary of state under Nixon, Senate majority leader Robert Dole, California governor Pete Wilson, and President Bill Clinton delivered the secular eulogies. The Reverend Billy Graham, representing the family, delivered the religious eulogy. As each man approached the podium, he stopped, faced the coffin and bowed slightly. The statements were generous and conciliatory, and after each the Navy chorus performed selections from its patriotic repertoire.

After the choir's singing of "America," the honor guard lifted the presidential coffin and stood at attention for the playing of the national anthem. A few moments of silence followed, then the faint sound of aircraft, then the thundering flyover salute. At last, the honor guard, accompanied by the band's solemn rendition of "America," bore the coffin to the other side of the white frame house where Richard Nixon had been born and reared. The contrast between majestic symbols of state and humble symbols of middle America sharpened as viewers followed the coffin to its burial place. The incumbent president, four former presidents, and the highly decorated pall and flag bearers, representing each of the armed forces, led the procession.

Close-up television pictures made the emotional texture of the event more moving to home audiences than to the people actually in attendance. It was the camera that revealed best the emotion of eulogists Henry Kissinger, whose voice trembled and lower lip quivered as he read his address, and Robert Dole, whose face contorted as he wept at the end of his statement. It was the camera that showed family members, like the hundreds who came to pay respects, standing at attention for the national anthem, their patriotic allegiance overriding their private grief. Close-ups disclosed the aging of former presidents and their wives and brought future presidential funerals to mind.

As television cameras followed the proceedings, they interspersed images of national power with the deceased president's two daughters and

their husbands, his grandchildren, brother, and friends. The effect was a sense of the presidency as a remote yet familiar institution—an office beyond comprehension yet filled by an ordinary man and family. The dignified demeanor of this family, on the other hand, amplified eulogists' portrayals of the dignity of the deceased.

EULOGIES

Richard Nixon's funeral eulogies are distinguishable from their classical precedents. A eulogy, as Thrall, Hibbard, and Holman (1960) define it, is "a formal, dignified speech or writing, highly praising a person or a thing" (189). Eulogies marking the deaths of earlier presidents, including George Washington and Abraham Lincoln, were written in elegant prose at the invitation of municipal or religious bodies. They were composed according to a classical model with a view to teaching virtue and persuading imitation; required an hour for delivery; and were printed for distribution (McManamon 1989; Schwartz 1986, 1991; Theroux 1997). The Nixon eulogies, like all eulogies now broadcast to a mass audience, were shorter, lasting no more than several minutes; written in simple rather than formal prose; and summarized in local newspapers. These eulogies were nevertheless the funeral's centerpoint. In a eulogy, Gilmore (1978) claims, the concrete details making up the life of a particular person are neutralized by the didacticism of the genre itself. "The deceased appears less as an individualized figure than as an emblem or symbol contrived for the purpose of

instructing an audience" in the standards of its culture (131). Is this really so? Every eulogy must appeal to cultural values to praise the dead, but can it be reduced to those values? Were Nixon's eulogists not also showing the deceased president to be a more complex individual than critics assert?

Official eulogists addressed separate themes, almost as if there had been a division of labor among them. Henry Kissinger emphasized the president's foreign policy triumphs. He announced that Richard Nixon, a "seminal president," had supervised America's transition from world "dominance" to world "leadership." He had ended the Vietnam war and the draft, as he had promised to do; had established a permanent dialogue with China; had improved relations with the Soviet Union; and had contained the conflict in the Middle East. Kissinger added that Nixon had made human rights an international issue, thus laying the moral foundation for Cold War victory. He also asserted that Nixon's Quaker background, with its emphasis on peace and reconciliation, had moved him powerfully on matters of foreign policy, so much so that he ignored reelection prospects and even long-term friendships in favor of his convictions.

Robert Dole opened his remarks by asserting that the second half of the twentieth century would be known as the "Age of Nixon." Portraying Richard Nixon as the personification of democracy, Dole pursued the second theme of the day. Born in the house his father had built, young Nixon had raised him-

self by hard work. "How American!" Dole exclaimed at this and other points in his delivery. Suffering as many defeats as victories, Nixon had sympathized with the plight of common people. He was "truly one of us," truly the man to recognize the dignity of middle America and the merit of the working man. This, according to Dole, is why domestic programs were crucial features of his presidency. Strengthening of environmental and nutritional programs, committing the government to a massive war against cancer, establishing revolutionary health care and welfare reforms that made more resources available than ever to the deserving poor—these measures could only have been inspired by profound love for the people. Richard Nixon was indeed the people's president—the pride of what he had called "the silent majority."

Pete Wilson enlarged on Dole's points as he emphasized Richard Nixon's moral character. He recounted the president's kindnesses to him while he was a young man breaking into politics. Just as Nixon had aided the new generation of politicians, he unselfishly had advised veterans as they managed the nation's affairs. He had been so unselfish, Wilson said, that he had chosen not to challenge his 1960 presidential election defeat, despite conspicuous irregularities, because it would have undermined the integrity of the presidency and the election process. "He so loved his country that he refused to risk its being torn apart by the constitutional crisis that might ensue." Where did this man acquire his generosity, his devotion to family

and nation, his capacity for hard work and willingness to take risks? Where did he get his "heart"? Governor Wilson's claim that President Nixon found his virtues in the mores of Orange County, California, may or may not have been accurate, but to most television viewers the possession of these virtues was more important than the source.

President Clinton summarized the previous speakers' points before coming to his own: Richard Nixon's life must be judged comprehensively. "Today is a day for his family, his friends, and his nation to remember President Nixon's life in totality. To them, let us say, May the day of judging President Nixon on anything less than his entire life and career come to a close."

The Reverend Billy Graham, too, referred to the totality of Richard Nixon's personal qualities: his bravery in the face of death, how difficult he had been to get to know despite the many kind deeds he had anonymously performed, how much compassion he had felt for the luckless and suffering. Above all, Graham noted, he had regularly prayed in the privacy of the White House, where his piety was known to God alone.

So short were the testimonies that they hardly seemed like eulogies at all, yet even a cursory examination shows they contained the traditional elements: an exordium (introduction), recitation of "external goods" (birthplace, family, education), and "goods of the soul" (including the cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, courage, and temperance, all of which had been established through recordable deeds [McManamon 1989,

20]). By articulating the unusual achievements of an ordinary man, the eulogies showed that consensual narratives (in this case, America as a setting where virtuous people rise from obscurity to fame) remained relevant to the integration of a post-modern society. The eulogies were not summaries of what everyone liked about Nixon but selective commentaries designed to convince a 1994 audience that one event, Watergate, could never summarize Richard Nixon's life or presidency.

The eulogies finished, the funeral entered its final phase. Pallbearers, moving in perfect unison, placed Richard Nixon's coffin over his grave, removed the flag, stretched it, as a canopy, above the coffin during the final sequence of gestures: the playing of taps, the long 21-gun salute, the rifle squad's briefer three-round salute, and prayers by the Reverend Graham. At last, the flag shielding the coffin was folded to the sound of the "Navy Hymn" and delivered to Tricia Nixon Cox, the older surviving child.

The final scene was ironic, for the officer delivering the flag to Mrs. Cox was one of the Americans her father allegedly despised—an African American. As the officer delivered his words of consolation and extended the folded flag to the president's daughter, she placed her white gloved hand on his and, visibly moved, looked up and thanked him. The bearing of Julie Nixon Eisenhower, the younger child, was slightly less self-possessed. Her head dropped tearfully as she took the pre-folded flag from the compassionate officer while David Eisenhower, her

husband, thanked him with a warm and grateful look. Nixon's brother Edward, too, acted graciously, although he appeared inconsolable. As the funeral party left the grave site, it seemed that a selfish, racist president could not be part of such a decent and patriotic family, could not be loved by daughters so deferentially polite and indifferent to color, could not be so deeply mourned by a brother. The demeanor of Richard Nixon's family had affirmed eulogists' claims about Richard Nixon's character.

COUNTER-EULOGIES

The day after Nixon was buried, his funeral rites and eulogies were detailed in American newspapers by straight reporting and by special commentaries; almost all of the latter were hostile. If Michael Gilmore (1978) were right and the eulogies were only nominally about Richard Nixon, these commentaries would make no sense. If *Radical History Review* had believed that eulogies were merely symbolic statements about society, its special section "Counter-Obituaries for Richard Milhous Nixon" (1994) would have been superfluous, as would have been the scores of biting critiques appearing in American newspapers.

The critics' discourse claimed to reflect the true foundations of the president's character, to gloss situational limits and unmask the villain as evil "in the first place," "fundamentally," "from the very beginning," "all along" (Garfinkel 1956). Nixon, according to *Time* magazine correspondent Otto Friedrich, was the

master of slurs and "symbol of the politics of anger" (1994, 43). Hunter Thompson, writing in *Rolling Stone* (1994), informed his readers that "Richard Nixon was an evil man—evil in a way that only those who believe in the physical reality of the Devil can understand. . . . It is Nixon himself who represents that dark, venal and incurably violent side of the American character that almost every country in the world has learned to fear and despise" (44).

Critics also attacked the eulogies by characterizing Nixon's positive actions as coerced, accidental, incidental, "shamelessly magnified," or by making them symptomatic of moral imperfection. Certain aspects of the president's sense of humor, for example, betrayed "his incessant anger and resentment at its core" (Chapman 1994), while his refusal to give in to adversity expressed malicious stubbornness. The expression "He's baaack!" summarizes the negative meaning of Nixon's "heart" (see, for example, Cheakalos 1997). Some critics denied the conventions of eulogy by criticizing authors for ignoring villainous episodes in Nixon's life and for failing to make his crimes understandable (Broder 1994; Semple 1994).

Nixon's antagonists disparaged him by discrediting his eulogists' motives as well as their words. Joe Queenan's "Gag Me with a Eulogy" (1994) tells the reader, beneath a cartoon of a weeping crocodile, that Kissinger spoke at Nixon's funeral in order to congratulate himself for foreign policy triumphs; Dole and Wilson, to exploit free television coverage for their respective political

agendas; and Clinton, in order to minimize his draft evasion, marital infidelity, and Whitewater troubles (see also Broder 1994; Goodman 1994). Other critics disparaged Nixon by deprecating the people attending his funeral. David Gergen, presidential adviser, "worked a row of mourners like a ropeline," as did the remnants of Nixon's old staff. The official delegation representing the U.S. Congress, too, used the funeral for a "flurry of politicking" (Von Drehle 1994). Also, the thousands who passed by Nixon's flag-draped casket were described as "largely working class, Mr. Nixon's kind of people" (Margolick 1994).

The most indignant mocked the very observance of Nixon's death. In the *Washington Post*, Jonathan Yardley (1994) wondered what kind of day would follow the National Day of Mourning for this "psychological basket case," "moral pygmy," and "unconvicted criminal." A postal holiday for John Dillinger? A national moment of silence for Lizzie Borden? The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), for its part, distributed a memo announcing it would close down nationally—for 18 and a half minutes (the length of the famous tape deletion). The memo proved to be a hoax. The ACLU did not close at all. One of the *Boston Globe's* commentators noted the special day by portraying the dead president in his coffin proclaiming in rap-style verse: "The name's Tricky Dicky and it's plain to see,/The flags are flying half-staff for me./The flags are flying half-staff for me" (English 1994). Finally, critics conceived the positive content of the eulogies as sympto-

matic of the diminished state of society, for which Nixon was responsible. Watergate was the beginning of not only a new series of government scandals but also a new tolerance of scandals that made Nixon, in retrospect, seem less menacing (Apple 1994; Emery 1994).

RITUAL AND BELIEF

Without reminders of President Nixon's crimes against the government—whether overblown or not—American society could not maintain its morality, for it is on public occasions that the boundary between right and wrong is dramatized (Erikson 1966). On the other hand, if there is no forgiveness for a president's offenses, then the authority of the presidency itself erodes (Schwartz 1979). Whether Richard Nixon's offenses were forgivable depended on the credibility of what his supporters, including his eulogists, asserted.

There can be no agreement on objects of moral assertion. Robert Dole, Elliott Richardson, Spiro Agnew, Bill Clinton, and George McGovern assembled at Richard Nixon's funeral despite disagreement between them as to what kind of president he had been. Yet, "what often underlies people's political allegiances," David Kertzer (1988) has observed, "is their social identification with a group rather than their sharing of beliefs with other members" (66). Ritual (including televised ritual) builds cohesion through uniformity of action rather than similarity of belief. Indeed, it is the gathering together of political and personal enemies that

defines the significance and power of the funeral ritual. Thus Kertzer is reiterating the key premise of the cultural approach to communication: that facts are mainly vehicles for thinking about other matters, like national identity, solidarity, history, and destiny.

Kertzer's weak point, like the weak point of culture of communication scholarship, is to have underestimated the relevance of belief. He declares that "one should be wary about attributing too much significance to a person's set of political beliefs, since these are neither consistent nor are they all equally developed and strongly held" (68). Kertzer's conception does not conform to beliefs about Richard Nixon, which may have been ambivalent but never ambiguous or casual. This is what makes eulogists' praise as important politically as critics' condemnations. Each interpreter—whether eulogist or critic—claims to be disclosing the true meaning of Nixon's life, but he or she is really altering what he or she finds unacceptable in it. For critics, Nixon's accomplishments were, in Freud's phrase, manifest contents concealing a latent realm of unworthy motives; for supporters, Nixon's manifest offenses concealed his latent beneficence. The facts remain unchanged, but each side, seeking to make them manageable in its own way, sees a part of the man that is invisible to the other.

Understanding Richard Nixon's relation to America's historical narrative requires not only our moving beyond the ritual and sentiment that it evokes but also our distinguishing between eulogy and biographical

commentary. Critically formulated in nonritual contexts, biography disenchant its object; eulogy, the ritually certified distilling of the noble and virtuous from the imperfect life, elevates its object. The contrast between biography and eulogy is not entirely clear-cut. Richard Nixon's biography reflects the ideals his eulogies express while his eulogies are rooted in biographical reality. This is necessarily the case. Whether a person's death promotes sorrow because we respect him or whether we attribute our (ritually induced) sorrow to his personal qualities (Bem 1972), funeral rites help reconcile the nation to the person who offended it because they make relevant the values whose existence the life history of that person ostensibly embodies.

Affirmative state ritual exaggerates national virtue, but, in some contexts, it is intellectually liberating. Thus, if critical journalists, as Zelizer (1992) might suggest, typically legitimate their own authority as they tell their stories, they must compete against other storytellers, including official eulogists. The journalists do not always prevail. The weekend after President Nixon's funeral, radio and television talk shows logged thousands of calls, the vast majority of which referred favorably to both the dignity of the ceremony and the ultimate decency of the man. Local newspaper editors received letters from readers shocked by the vileness of anti-Nixon commentary. The issue, however, is not whether Nixon's funeral rites elevated his reputation. Our data do not bear on this question, although Michael Schudson (1992) may have been right when he

asserted that history resists attempts to be made over and that the stigma of Watergate would permanently mark this man. The issue is whether state funeral rites affirm the merit of Richard Nixon, as a president and a man, solely by manipulating emotion or by also revealing facts or by making positive accomplishments more relevant than faults (Iyengar and Kinder 1987). The merits and faults of individual leaders do not vanish when they are transformed into collective symbols.

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