RICHARD NIXON IN FORENSICS

by Roger Morris

[The new Oliver Stone movie Nixon *has sparked new interest in America's only President to resign. Roger Morris' book* Richard Milhous Nixon: Rise of an American Politician *gives a fascinating view of young Richard as a forensic competitor, debater, and young actor. Nixon was granted honorary NFL membership whenVice-President in 1960. His Key was presented by NFL President Senator Karl Mundt]*

Speech Class

. . . Ironically, he received his lowest grades at the beginning of what would be his most memorable course, oral English and public speaking, taught by a young red-haired Ph.D. named Lynn Sheller. Sheller gave him C's at the outset and thought Richard "a serious shy boy" who was clearly "not a born speaker." Yet the teacher soon found him working doggedly to write out speeches with great care and to memorize them. "Nixon overcame his honest humility and became a pretty good speaker," the coach concluded. Stressing simplicity, economy, and repetition in the persuasive speech, Sheller taught them "to be convinced in what they have to say," and the "importance of choosing just one point to make." "Otherwise," he told them constantly, "people won't remember what you were talking about."

High School Forensics

Losing his first oratorical contest without even placing, he went on to win a school title, and finished second in a larger Orange County meet. Forensic success, like high grades, delighted Frank [Nixon, his father], who "regarded rhetorical skill as a demonstration of superior education," wrote one observer, and began to accompany him to contests, making copious notes on both Richard and the competition. In his public speeches, thought some who heard them both, the son would sound increasingly like the father. Moreover, there were those who felt that Richard had taken on something of Frank Nixon's sheer verbal sparring, flexing fast words and combativeness, contention without conviction. Coming back from a school picnic in the mountains, Alice Walker found Richard arrogantly taking the opposite side in whatever they discussed. "We argued all the way back about which would be more useful to take with you into the wilds -- a goat or a mule. Dick said a goat, and then argued in favor of the mule," she recounted. More and more, Helen Letts remembered similar polemics at Christian Endeavor meetings, where he seemed to disagree or provoke a dispute almost apart from what he believed. "I don't think it was because he wanted to be for or against anything, it was just for the argument, really."

With his father's enthusiastic support, he continued extracurricular debate and public speaking. "Of course, he had the bulldog tenacity that his father had," said Ralph Palmer, who thought him still "more of a Milhous" than a Nixon. "It made a wonderful combination. . . He was more explosive; he was a dynamic individual. He'd pound the table if he was going to make a point, you see." But Richard was no longer the earnest, awkward student struggling against an instinctive shyness Lynn Sheller had watched him overcome at Fullerton or the boy who playfully tried his polemics with the girls on outings or at Sunday school -- and the reactions were no longer so admiring or sympathetic. "He had this ability to kind of slide round an argument instead of meeting it head-on," his Whittier debate coach, Mrs. Clifford Vincent, would remember afterward. She was often "disturbed" that he could take any side of a debate with such technical skill. "There was something mean in him," she would relate more than forty years later, "mean in the way he put his questions, argued his points."

Mrs. Vincent was not alone in her disquiet. Though few of his teachers were openly critical at the time, and fewer still when he had become prominent, the other side of his high school debate reputation was there, politely muted in the small town. "He offended some of his Quaker teachers by his willingness to justify bad means by the end. They said he cared too much about winning school contests," revealed a *Whittier Daily News* editor, Loverne Morris, who often heard the private misgivings. "His schoolmates were proud of his winnings but admired rather than liked him." Forrest Randall remembered that it was easy enough to set Dick Nixon talking or arguing, but "it wouldn't be an intellectual discussion, it wouldn't be intriguing or creative. Well, it would be a dogmatic, pedagogical kind of argument that would be no fun at all."

Constitutional Oratory

Both years at Whittier he entered the *Los Angeles Times* oratorical contests extolling the virtues of the U.S. Constitution, and the speeches he wrote gave the first hints of his emerging views on politics and government. . . For the . . . winners there were community accolades and crowded audiences cheering for them at the widening district competition, the Whittier Parent-Teacher Association patriotically paying expenses to out-of-town contests.

. . . the winning Whittier

oration of 1929 was Richard Milhous Nixon's "Our Privileges Under the Constitution." It had been written as he was to write all his school speeches, almost entirely alone with little help from teachers or family, drafted on a tablet in the belfry office and then read to his father, whose criticism and suggestions changed the text little. His high school coach polished spelling and punctuation, weaknesses Nixon would carry through college and into law school, but the diction and voice remained very much his own. . . His interpretation of constitutional privileges conformed clearly enough with the prevailing views of his local audience and judges, as well as adopting some favorite editorial canons of the *Los Angeles Times*. "Mr. Nixon has a splendid oration," pronounced the Whittier Daily News, "and he delivers it in a forceful and convincing manner."

His main theme was not to expand on Constitutional privileges so much as to warn against their abuse and to set out proper limits against excesses. In freedom of speech and press, he found inherent dangers to public morality and order, and he devoted the heart of his 1929 oration to a remarkable passage on the hazards of Constitutional rights.

> The framers of the Constitution provided that we, their descendants, need not fear to express our sentiments as they did. Yet the question arises: How much ground do these privileges cover? There are some who use them as a cloak for covering libelous, indecent, and injurious statements against their fellowmen. Should the morals of the nation be offended and polluted in the name of freedom of speech or freedom of the press? In the words of Lincoln, the individual can have no rights against the best interests of society. Furthermore, there are those who, under the pretense of freedom of speech and freedom of the press, have incited riots, assailed our patriotism, and denounced the Constitution itself. They have used Constitutional privileges to protect the very act by which they wished to destroy the Constitution. Consequently laws have justly been provided for punishing those who abuse their Constitutional privileges -- laws which do not limit these privileges, but which provide that they may not be instrumental in destroying the Constitution which insures them. We must obey these laws, for they have been passed for our own welfare.

For a sixteen-year-old, it was obviously serious political thought. The text was also rich in ironic portent of his subsequent political career, his views of the press, of conformity and radicalism -- even in the strained allusion to Lincoln, an eerie foreshadowing of the concept of national security and executive power that would make his own Presidency the great Constitutional crisis of the century . . . .

The following year, he sounded some of the same ritual warning against enemies of the Constitution. But his oration in the 1930 contest also gave some clue to his knowledge about the world outside and, again, an uncanny intimation of his own policies in the White House. He chose among the prescribed topics "America's Progress -- Its Dependence on the Constitution." He defined that progress "by the increase of its wealth, territory and power," and not least by its prestige. "That nation whose government was once the world's laughing-stock, and whose power was comparatively futile, now commands the respect of the world's greatest nations." Such "stupendous progress -- our present-day worldwide power" traced plainly to matters of national character and geography; it showed "that the people who settled in this country were of a superior type" and "that the tremendous natural resources of the land were especially fitted for the development of a nation."

Most of all, America owed her success to "that powerful instrument, the United States Constitution." . . .

Still, he managed in the 1930 speech to find perils at home along with heartening imitation abroad. "At the present time," he wrote less than six months after the stock market crash, "a great wave of indifference to the Constitution's authority, disrespect of its law, and opposition to its basic principles threatens its very foundations." In his peroration was yet another irony and premonition, especially when read against the controversy in which his own Presidency would crumble.

> For as long as the Constitution is respected, its laws obeyed and its principles enforced, America will continue to progress. But if the time should ever come when America will consider this document too obsolete to cope with changed ideals in government, then the time will have arrived when the American people as an undivided nation must come back to normal and change their ideals to conform with those mighty principles set forth in our incomparable Constitution.

Both years he won the local contest, with a ten-dollar prize from the town Kiwanis, twenty dollars from the *Times*, and the orations proudly published in the school annual. Each time, though, he lost at a higher level of competition outside Whittier. The family remembered less the merits or substance of the competition than the pressure and hopes that had gathered behind his speaking success, and the community-wide prestige it had brought. Hadley Marshburn recalled how upset Hannah Nixon had been when her son

lost in the advanced round in 1930. "His mother didn't like that. She thought he should have scored better," Marshburn said. "I know his mother wasn't a pusher or a driver, but she was always anxious to see him excel and get to the top in whatever he did."

Oratory and debate led to his first political campaign. Debating success, and especially his performance in the *Times* oratorical contest, moved the Whittier Union administration in the spring of 1929 to nominate Richard Nixon for student body president the following year on a faculty-approved slate of candidates. . . .

College Drama

. . . [Professor Albert] Upton coached and directed Nixon in a series of college dramas that he played with relish and increasing skill. They began in May 1931 with Booth Tarkington's *The Trysting Place* and eighteen-year-old Nixon as "a middle aged gentleman." Using Richard's deepening voice and sober, dark-haired good looks, Upton cast him repeatedly as an older man, parts invariably of more substance and challenge than the romantic leads most students coveted. "He had a deep voice and an old man's face," another actor recalled, "and he seemed to have physical substance. The effect was more maturity." In John Drinkwater's *Bird in Hand* the autumn of his junior year, Nixon was an elderly country innkeeper losing his daughter to a charmer from the city. Upton "tried to convert a young kid who walked on the balls of his feet to an old man who walked on his heels," the director remembered. "While not a great athlete, he had a springy step and a fine youthful body, and my first problem was to teach him to walk across the stage as if he were at least forty years older."

Upton also taught him to weep openly on stage. "I showed him how to get up a good cry, told him if you got your throat acting up you'd get tears in your eyes," he said later. Actor and director were uncertain of the crying, and it was never rehearsed before opening. But the night of the performance, Richard Nixon sat heavily in a chair, telling the story of his lost daughter while tears rolled down his nose and cheeks and fell in his lap with an emotion and realism those who saw it recalled half a lifetime later. He had given "an outstanding performance" and "carried his part with exceptional skill," said the *Quaker Campus*. "Richard Nixon, playing the heavy role of the English innkeeper," pronounced the yearbook *Acropolis*, "acted with a surety that has been seen far too seldom in Whittier productions!" Afterward, Upton was impressed no less. "Now, there are tricks to this, but people with imagination, and who sympathize with their fellow-man, reach this emotional stage without artificial means," he once said about Nixon's tears. "I was amazed at his perfection." He played in three more college productions over his last two years, all to similarly admiring reviews. "Dick loved the stage," Upton would say later. "Nixon was the easiest person to direct I've ever dealt with. He'd come to class with his lines memorized [and] do what I told him to do." On another occasion the professor said of him, "I've never coached an amateur who responded so quickly and intelligently to suggestions."

He was taut and temperamental before performances. "To the best property mistress W.C. ever had," he wrote in childish hand and green ink in the yearbook of Marjorie Hildreth. "Forgive all my nervous fits and thank you for your soothing words." Answering a fan who years later sent him a souvenir copy of the program from *Bird in Hand*, he self-consciously relived his stage fright as the old proprietor: "I can still remember thinking my legs would give out or I would lose my voice at some crucial moment." Both on stage and from the audience, Ola Welch saw him as "a marvelous actor, quick, perceptive, responsive, industrious," who had "great stage presence and an almost instinctive rapport with his audience." To Upton he was a performer plainly "at home on the platform [who] got a thrill out of getting to an audience." It was all an experience, the director reflected, that "didn't hurt his ego." At the moment, both his drama coach and girlfriend thought him so devoted to acting that he might well go into the theater professionally. "I honestly believe that if he had made the stage his career instead of studying law," Ola once remarked, "I'm sure he would have developed into a top-notch leading man." Upton would conclude decades later and after generations of students that Nixon was "the most competent student I ever had, but I couldn't think of him as a genius or as a boy destined for greatness. . . . I wouldn't have been surprised if, after college, he had gone to New York or Hollywood looking for a job as an actor.". . .

College Debate

More than any academic experience, it was college debating that seemed to foreshadow and ever shape his later entry into national politics. He debated all four years at Whittier, and his triumphs were celebrated by later writers and in part by Nixon himself, who saw in debate the successful campaigner and congressional investigator he would become.

He was painstakingly prepared, keeping on small index cards notes from research or from advice asked of [Professor Paul] Smith and Upton, little *aide-memoire* he stuffed in his suit-coat pocket, a habit he would carry through most of his political life.

Despite experience in high school, he was visibly nervous before debates, much as he was tense before walking on stage as an actor. "But as soon as he began to speak," team manager Kenny Ball remembered, "he would always seem to settle down." Having spoken, he wrote furiously as he sat listening to opposing speakers or his teammate, from time to time impatiently thrusting on his partner an attack or rebuttal scribbled in what one of them called his "impossible handwriting and own particular style of condensing words and phrases." "He'd write like mad and hand it to you to read from the scrawls," said Osmyn Stout, who was frequently teamed with him for one year. "He always had the answers for everybody and some of the men didn't like this."

His own delivery could be quick and cutting, but his physical gestures awkward and the style broken by stilted phrases. A sometime opponent, William Hornaday, thought him "very astute and serious, no humor, it was to the point," yet given to the "old-time emphasis -- 'May I make this one thing clear.'" For three years he would be in the shadow of another Whittier debater, Joe Sweeney, a red-haired, confident, and outgoing Irishman who was a Franklin and whom the newspaper pronounced only half in jest Nixon's deadly rival." "He was not our best debater at all," Osmyn Stout would say of Richard Nixon when asked about his reputation as a college champion. "A fellow named Sweeney was much better."

Arguing tariff policy, the team drove back and forth in 1930-31 among other small schools of the Southern California Debating Conference -- California Christian, Cal Tech, La Verne, Redlands, and Pasadena. Kenny Ball remembered Frank Nixon following them avidly, taking notes just as he had done in high school. "And his father would always take us to the debates if we needed transportation. He was very much interested in hearing Dick and how he got along." Nixon became, he wrote later, "a convinced free-trader" as a result of that season, and his victory over perennial conference champion Redlands made him a campus hero. The next year, Frank Nixon loaned the team his big Packard for a thirty-five-hundred-mile trip through the Pacific Northwest, in which they argued the question of government economic controls and won twenty-four of twenty-seven debates. . . . Afterward, the team teased their devout and sober Quaker colleague about the trip. Richard Nixon had "toured the Northwest with the debate team," said the *Quaker Campus*, "leaving a trail blazed with victories and fluttering feminine hearts."

The next season, 1932-33, was to be Whittier's chance for national acclaim in forensics. For the topic of U.S. cancellation of the Allied war debts, an entire reference room of the city library was turned over to the team, and funds raised for another three-thousand-mile eighteen-day regional tour, this time with Sweeney and Nixon as a single team on both sides of the question. "Blizzards, mix-ups in dates, and hard-headed judges" is how the *Acropolis* would later characterize the trip. More plainly, it was a competitive disaster. Against larger schools, they won only one debate. "Nixon overwhelmed us with his first speech, and won the audience," recalled Weldon Taylor, one of the opponents at Brigham Young, "but we had the data." That spring they lost the championship cup back to Redlands, and the year ended with a dinner at the Nixon home behind the grocery in honor of Joe Sweeney's last season.

His rival graduated, Nixon won the *Reader's Digest* extemporaneous speaking contest among conference colleges in the autumn of 1933, but the debate team, arguing the expansion of Presidential power, entered only two tournaments his senior year and went winless. In the wake of the forlorn 1933 tour there were no more regional trips scheduled, and college appropriations to the program were cut drastically. After a bright beginning, his college debating career would end with little fanfare and two years of consistent defeat, though the actual record remained buried while the legend of his forensic powers grew.

"He was a merciless opponent," concluded one Whittier teacher. Dick's great strength, manager Kenny Ball remembered, "was his ability to get his opponent off-balance. He would so fluster the other speaker with his steady attack that his opposition would become emotional and stop thinking clearly." Ball recounted how Nixon had become angry and ineffectual during the hapless 1933 season, and later guarded against it. "Dick himself lost a debate once against La Verne College because he lost his temper. He learned his lesson, and that never happened again." Another classmate, Louis Valla, thought Nixon debated in his final college years with almost a controlled rage. He once advised Valla, "To be a good debater, you've got to be able to get mad on your feet without losing your head." William Hornaday saw the same anger in the scrawled notes Nixon passed to teammates. One of them to Hornaday read insistently "Pour it on at this point!" What had begun as suggestions of substantive arguments became in the last two years curt orders about technique -- "save your ammunition," "play to the judges, they're the ones who decide."

Kenny Ball and his other partners also watched how he might suddenly depart from the carefully prepared case, perplexing his own team no less than opponents. "I know that a few times when I debated with him even I did not know what he was going to say," Ball recounted. "He would come out suddenly extemporaneously with some ideas that I had not heard before when we were going over the material for the debate." Hornaday remembered, "He never left

himself unguarded. Here I'd be opposing him, you know, and . . . we had debated on the same issue before, and I thought he'd used practically the same material as I was. He would come up with something that would just beat us down -- oh, my! Always using that ace in the hole. He always looked for that."

One morning late in February 1933, Nixon's team debated Southern California in Founders. Early in the match Nixon seemed relaxed and confident before the home crowd, and he brought down the house with humorous asides. "The world is going to the bow-wows," a girl in the audience remembered him saying. It struck them all as so amusing. But as the contest wore on, USC scored noticeably and Whittier needed a rally in the final rebuttals. The *Quaker Campus* editor, Lois Elliot, was sitting in a balcony just above the debaters. "I remember it clearly," she said long afterward. "It took place in the spring of 1933. I was editor on the school paper covering the debate. I sat in the gallery, and I saw when Nixon spoke in his rebuttal that he quoted from a blank paper. I told it later to my roommate; it was against all regulations, and very cunning. I remember it well."

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