

ALL THE PRESIDENT'S SPIN



A visitor to the **Richard Nixon Library** finds the place much like the man: defensive, misleading, and still arguing about Watergate.



By Neil Swidey
GLOBE STAFF

YORBA LINDA, Calif. — Beneath the glistening reflecting pool, behind the interactive exhibits, beside the resplendent rose garden, Richard Nixon is here.

By that I mean much more than just his image. Like every presidential library, the Richard Nixon Library and Birthplace is packed with pictures of the great man. Here he is in his Whittier College debate team photo, the teenager's body somehow saddled with the middle-aged man's face. Over there he is shaking hands with a bleary-eyed Elvis, the irony of the president's enlistment of the pill-popping performer in a war on drugs seemingly lost on them both.

What I really mean is here is Nixon's unmistakable aura, his incomparable ability to make things worse by trying to convince you nothing is wrong.

Tomorrow is the 30th anniversary of the "third-rate burglary" that brought down the Nixon presidency. I came to Yorba Linda wondering if time had

tempered Nixon's self-destructive streak. Three decades after the Watergate break-in, 12 years after the Nixon library opened, eight years after his death, how straightforward would the center Nixon created to cement his legacy be about the events that expelled him from office?

The answer: not very, even by Nixonian standards. But after a Nixon security guard threatened to have me arrested, I began to wonder if I was using appropriate standards for evaluating the place. If truth is always a little elusive at presidential libraries, should it even be a factor in judging the library erected to remember the president who may have been most allergic to it? If a primary goal of such a library is to capture the essence of its president, could the gratuitously suspicious staff and the offensively defensive exhibits they preside over make Nixon's the best-matched presidential library in the country?

Looking for the truth at a presidential library is

NIXON, Page M12



AP PHOTOS/LEE CELANO

Top: the reflecting pool at the Nixon Library and Birthplace. Above: a '50s television playing the "Checkers" speech alongside some of the mail it spurred. Right: the dark corridor of the library's Watergate exhibit.



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Built and still sustained by private money

► NIXON
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like searching for sincerity in those "drink in moderation" commercials sponsored by the beer companies. It's just not the point.

Presidential libraries are designed to showcase their subjects in the most favorable light. Still, they draw serious researchers as well as the windbreaker-clad senior citizen groups, and all of them but Nixon's are taxpayer-supported, so they have an obligation to find room for some of the commander-in-chief's less presidential moments. So although the Cuban Missile Crisis gets a whole room and a reverent, 30-minute film at the John F. Kennedy Library, and the Bay of Pigs fiasco gets only an apologetic 50-word paragraph on a small text panel, at least the paragraph is there.

Another thing about presidential libraries: Like bottles of Bordeaux and shares of Berkshire Hathaway, they tend to improve

with age. When Lyndon B. Johnson's library opened in 1971, feelings about Vietnam were still raw; today, the war and the anti-LBJ protest movement it spawned are dealt with in a manner that historians generally agree is evenhanded. Monticello, the superbly managed historic site dedicated to understanding its enigmatic architect, Thomas Jefferson, now offers a tour told from the perspective of the plantation's slaves.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt began the presidential library tradition, believing his papers should be archived and made available to scholars and the public. The arrangement has been roughly the same ever since: Private dollars build the library, and then the federal government steps in to finance and run it. There are now 10 presidential libraries overseen by the National Archives and Records Administration, and one more in the works, Bill Clinton's. But, as with so much else relat-



GLOBE PHOTO/DENISE DROWER

"The greatest honor history can bestow is the title of peacemaker," reads Nixon's gravestone in Yorba Linda.

ing to Nixon, his library stands apart.

The fact that the Nixon library, unlike its counterparts in the federal system, is operated entirely with private money is presented as a badge of fiscally conservative honor around the Yorba Linda complex. But the trade-offs are clear. The library is continually short of cash. Posters implore visitors to consider renting the place for their weddings, corporate meetings, or high school proms. (You have to love the image: The ghost of our famous law-and-order president with the permanent 5 o'clock shadow hovering over a gaggle of teenagers on such a hormonally active night.) In the gift shop, the Nixon-Elvis image is plastered on everything from T-shirts to soap to shot glasses. (Sure, the photo mocks both its subjects, but proceeds help keep the electricity on.) Towering stacks of Julie Nixon Eisenhower's book about her mother, "Pat Nixon: The Untold Story," line the en-

try hall. (They've been discounted to \$5 each.)

Moreover, the Nixon library gets no federal money because it houses no presidential papers.

Some 47 million pages and 3,700 hours of recordings from the Nixon presidency sit in a National Archives office in College Park, Md. The setup dates back to the swirl of controversy surrounding Nixon's Aug. 9, 1974, resignation, and Congress's insistence that his White House materials be preserved and made available to the public in order to shed light on the administration's misdeeds.

So we're left with this bizarre arrangement: A federal office in Maryland maintains and periodically releases damning transcripts of the 37th president while a private facility in Orange County, Calif., persists in pushing the sunny side of his story.

"Being privately run, they can present the view of the presidency that they want to present," said Richard Claypoole, the government's assistant archivist in charge of presidential libraries, who has never toured the Yorba Linda library. "If the Nixon library was part of the fold, we would handle it the way we handle the others, to try to present the full picture."

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White House aide Egil Krogh arranged for President Nixon to greet Elvis Presley on the singer's 1970 visit to Washington.

He felt undone by style, not substance

Continued from preceding page

Since the Nixon library opened in 1990, there have been several attempts to bring it under the federal umbrella. But issues of family control and finances have scuttled those efforts, and the goal now appears more distant than ever. An internal fight on the library board pits Nixon's children, Julie Nixon Eisenhower and Tricia Nixon Cox, against each other. Eisenhower joined a lawsuit this year aimed at forcing her sister to agree to the library foundation's plan on how to use a long-delayed \$19 million bequest from the estate of Bebe Rebozo, their father's close friend.

On the surface, the Nixon library appears more than willing to deal with his presidency's darkest chapter. Library literature boasts that "the Watergate Gallery is the largest exhibit dedicated to a single subject." What it doesn't mention is how the exhibit still employs some of the same obfuscation tactics that got Nixon into trouble 30 years ago. Really, is there any need to continue to argue that the mysterious 18½-minute gap on the White House tape Nixon was forced to turn over "could easily have been caused by a mechanical malfunction"?

Even before the Watergate exhibit, though, there are signs of trouble. Take the display on the famous "Checkers" speech, in which Nixon invoked his daughters' cuddly cocker spaniel to avert being dumped from the Republican ticket in 1952 amid allegations he kept a secret slush fund. The exhibit points out that "Many politicians, including the Democratic nominee, Adlai Stevenson, had similar political funds" and asks us to accept Nixon's use of Checkers as the act of a concerned father rather than a desperate (though smart) politician. Exhibits on his 1960 campaign against Kennedy manage to carry

Nixon's bitterness into the present. Unlike the corresponding exhibit at the Kennedy library, in which stump footage of both candidates is evenly apportioned, the argument advantage here is all Nixon's. In the section on their televised debates, a narrator laments, "What Nixon and indeed the entire political world learned from the first debate was that, especially on television, style was more important than substance." As the exhibits progress chronologically into his presidency, there are curiously circumspect references to the 1970 Kent State shootings ("tragically, in the ensuing panic, shots rang out") and the

Continued on next page

If you go...

Richard Nixon Library & Birthplace

18001 Yorba Linda Blvd.
Yorba Linda, Calif.
714-993-5075
www.nixonlibrary.org
Admission: \$5.95; seniors, 62-plus, \$3.95; children ages 8 to 11, \$2; under 8, free.
Dedicated: 1990; 2001 visitors: 147,043.

The facility is privately financed and, unlike the other entries, not part of the presidential library system administered by the National Archives and Records Administration. President Nixon's White House papers are maintained by NARA's Richard Nixon Presidential Materials Staff.

The Herbert Hoover Library

210 Parkside Drive
West Branch, Iowa
319-643-5301
www.hoover.archives.gov
Admission: \$2; senior citizens 62-plus, \$1; children under 16 years, free.
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The Franklin D. Roosevelt Library

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Hyde Park, N.Y.
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www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu
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Dedicated: 1940; 2001 visitors: 112,755.

The Harry S. Truman Library

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816-833-1400
www.trumanlibrary.org
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Dedicated: 1957; 2001 visitors: 65,184.

The Dwight D. Eisenhower Library

Southeast Fourth Street
Abilene, Kan.
785-263-4751
www.eisenhower.utexas.edu
Admission: \$3.50; senior citizens 62-plus, \$3; children under 15, free.
Dedicated: 1954; 2001 visitors: 77,220.

The John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library

Columbia Point

Boston
617-929-4500
www.jfklibrary.org
Admission: \$8; senior citizen 62-plus and students with IDs, \$6; children ages 13-17, \$4; under 12, free.
Dedicated: 1979; 2001 visitors: 199,630.

The Lyndon Baines Johnson Library

2313 Red River St.
Austin, Texas
512-916-5137
www.lbjlib.utexas.edu
Admission: free.
Dedicated: 1971; 2001 visitors: 181,629.

The Gerald R. Ford Library and Museum

1000 Beal Ave.
Ann Arbor, Mich.
734-741-2218
www.ford.utexas.edu
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The Jimmy Carter Library

441 Freedom Parkway
Atlanta
404-331-3942
www.jimmycarterlibrary.org
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The Ronald Reagan Library

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AP PHOTOS/LEE CELANO

Visitors wait to tour the Yorba Linda house his father built and in which Richard Nixon was born and lived until he was nine, when he moved to Whittier.

A beautiful setting for his history as Nixon saw it and made it

► **NIXON**
Continued from Page M1

secret expansion of the Vietnam War into Cambodia (referred to as "unannounced bombing runs") during his administration.

And yet, the full slant of the Watergate exhibit still comes as a bit of a shock. The Domestic Affairs Gallery, bright and big enough to showcase Nixon's presidential limousine, gives way to the Watergate Gallery, a dark, narrow tunnel, where visitors must squint to read the narrative told in small white letters set against a black background. While it concedes that "inexcusable misjudgments" were made, it quickly reverts to finger pointing and counter-criticism of Nixon's critics. It points out, in a calculated non sequitur, that US Senator Sam Ervin, the

Democratic chairman of the Watergate committee, voted against the Civil Rights Act of 1964. We're asked to cut Nixon slack on the "so-called smoking gun" tape — in which he approves the plan to have the CIA tell the FBI to back off from its Watergate investigation — because he called off the plan two weeks later.

Then, in perhaps the most bizarrely naked phrasing, it notes: "Washington Post reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, in their zeal to create a Watergate story through which they had to uncover violations of law and ethics, may have violated law and ethics themselves . . . Woodward and Bernstein used anonymous sources exclusively to try and convict the President in the pages of the Post and in their best-selling

book: "All The President's Men." Three decades later, do we still need to be shooting the messenger?

One more notable quote from the Watergate gallery: "Not one shred of evidence was ever unearthed which even remotely suggested that the President ordered the bugging or knew about it in advance."

This must be said: The Nixon library and grounds are gorgeous. The sleek, airy, Spanish-style library sits on nine manicured acres that seem a world away from the Southern California strip malls that are all too close by. Swaying palm trees and roses in full bloom line a dramatic reflecting pool that separates the library from the modest clapboard farmhouse

where Nixon was born.

And the library deserves credit for the quantity of space it devotes to Watergate, which far exceeds what other presidential libraries give to their president's most embarrassing moments. "We don't run from it," Arianna Barrios, the library's director of communications, told me later. "The things that President Nixon battled with are here, on display."

It's true it might have been easier to stick a tiny Watergate exhibit behind more extensive galleries touting Nixon's foreign policy successes. But it's also true that Nixon knew he could never get past Watergate

by ignoring it; he had to chip away at it. That spirit of the never-ending spin, to ridiculous degrees, is what makes the Watergate Gallery so infuriating.

'The things that President Nixon battled with are here, on display. . . . [The library leaves] a lot of room for people to make their own decisions.'

ARIANNA BARRIOS
Richard Nixon Library

While Barrios argues that the library leaves "a lot of room for people to make their own decisions," she concedes that one person's opinion carried a good deal of weight. "The president was alive when the library was built and he had a great amount of say in what should be played up," she said.

But he's been dead for eight years now, and it's time to get back to reality. In many of its other exhibits, the library proves it can do

better, with interesting, rounded presentations. The displays on the former communist-hunting Nixon's historic visit to China are particularly informative, and the World Leaders Gallery featuring gifts from heads of state is a lot of fun. Nixon did much good, both internationally and domestically, and it is helpful to be reminded of his lasting achievements.

But somehow I was doomed to be left with a different lasting memory.

As my wife and I rounded the path by the reflecting pool, a security guard stood, arms folded, in front of the birthplace. There were slightly more than 10 minutes before the daily 5 p.m. closing, so we walked briskly.

Our 2½-year-old daughter had mercifully napped in her stroller for the entire afternoon as we wandered through the library. We

Continued on next page

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GLOBE PHOTO/DENISE DROWER

A guard stands where young Richard Nixon and his brothers played. Nixon was born in the house in 1913.

Finding everywhere the Nixon of memory

Continued from preceding page
figured the birthplace, with its cozy interior and turn-of-the-century furniture, might interest her, so we saved that until she woke up.

As we made our way to the front door, the guard cut us off. "We're closed," he barked.

I explained that we knew it was near closing time, and we would be willing to just pop our heads in and then leave, but that we'd come a long way, and that staffers had been clear when we bought our tickets we could proceed in any order we wished until 5 p.m.

"We're closed," he repeated, with obvious self-satisfaction.

As with the Nixon men before him, it was not so much his initial action, but his behavior after being confronted about it that made things worse. All he had to do was inform us, apologetically, that the birthplace closed early, or perhaps offer to let us peek in.

Instead, he ordered us to get off the grounds. When we refused, he threatened more than once to call the police.

I told him to call the library director instead. "I have people here who refuse to leave," he growled

into his walkie-talkie.

I went back into the library to find the director myself. Inside, suspicious staffers tried unsuccessfully to raise the director. A supervisor told one staffer on the phone to tell me there was no way we could see the birthplace. When I insisted that the supervisor tell me in person, the decision was reversed, and a different security guard was instructed to take us through the birthplace.

In about three minutes, we zipped through the farmhouse Nixon's father built, showing our daughter the piano Nixon played

as a boy, hearing about the bed he slept in, and then thanking the second guard before making our way off the grounds.

It was only much later that my anger over the incident morphed into appreciation. Intentionally or not, the staff had given us a truly Nixonian experience, one that had begun brimming with promise but had deteriorated quickly, and ended so pathetically. For no apparent reason.

Neil Swidey can be reached at nswidey@globe.com.

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