

James Worthen. *The Young Nixon and His Rivals: Four Californian Republicans Eye the White House, 1946-1958*. Jefferson, NC and London: McFarland & Company, 2010. 233pp.

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How important is personality to a politician's success? In James Worthen's new study of mid-century Californian politics, policy is swept aside to highlight the ambitions, vanities and insecurities that drove four leading Republican figures in their quest for the Oval Office. Our protagonists are: Goodwin Knight, California's witty and charismatic Governor between 1953 and 1959; William Knowland, an aloof and uncompromising Senate Majority Leader, who later shot himself; the relentlessly fascinating Richard Nixon, whose rapid rise from the House of Representatives to the Vice-Presidency anchors the book; and Earl Warren, thrice-elected State Governor and later a pragmatic Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. This is an often compelling tale of political feuds and ruthless positioning that culminates in four rivals from one state dominating the national Republican scene.

Worthen, a former CIA official, begins by sketching brief but effective biographies of the four men. His prose is light and journalistic, though hindered by occasional lapses: Nixon, for instance, is rather clumsily described as having "a facility for oral self-expression" (38). Their subsequent careers are deeply intertwined, but fraught with conflicting aspirations. After all four men are elected to various state offices in 1946, it is Warren who initially emerges as the most powerful figure in Californian politics. In fact, as Worthen demonstrates, Warren's bid for governor was dependent upon the support of William Knowland's father, Joe, the owner of the *Oakland Tribune*. Indeed, throughout the book, Worthen emphasises the influence of regional media proprietors, especially Norman Chandler. Once-grand metropolitan newspapers such as the *Los Angeles Times* can only dream of such authority now.

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The concurrent rise of Knight, Knowland, Nixon and Warren reaches a crescendo with the 1952 Republican conference in Chicago and the negotiations concerning the party's Presidential nomination. This is the centrepiece of the book, and Worthen explains Nixon's extraordinary back-stage manoeuvring in rich detail. After intricate plotting on the train to Chicago and at the conference itself, Nixon ensures himself a place on the Republican ticket alongside Dwight Eisenhower – despite previously pledging his support to Warren. Warren brands Nixon “a traitor” (103), but soon Tricky Dick is heading to the White House.

An even more competitive scenario develops in 1956, when all four of Worthen's protagonists are considered legitimate contenders for the Presidential nomination, as Eisenhower's fragile health generates fevered speculation. By now, Knight and Nixon had developed a bitter feud, based on perceived slights concerning media attention and personal messages. Worthen has clearly trawled through the relevant correspondence and newspaper coverage in his research, and there is much humour to be found in the petty wrangling of such powerful figures, especially as displayed in one hilarious photograph: Nixon stands arm-in-arm with Warren and Knowland, disingenuous smiles on all three faces, while Knight fumes on the sidelines (140). When the dust settled, of course, it was Nixon, doughty as ever, who remained Vice President, awaiting his first shot at the ultimate prize in 1960. Knight and Knowland's careers, meanwhile, ended in electoral disaster after a confused attempt to switch jobs in 1958. Warren, who emerges from the book as the most dignified of the four men, transcends the turmoil from his seat in the Supreme Court.

As a case study of political ambition, Worthen's book contains much to recommend it. These are vivid, compelling characters, labelled “movie heroes” and products of a Californian “star system” by a Democratic opponent (13). Yet, while Worthen openly declares “this is not a book about policy” (1), his personality-based approach has distinct limitations. One longs for some insight into legislative achievement or governmental competence amidst the inexorable intrigue. Ideological differences are summarised with broad brushstrokes when, for example, a more acute analysis of Warren's liberal Republicanism might enhance the debate. Worthen resists engaging in questions of policy, yet even his biographical focus occasionally falters. Conclusions such as, “In the end, the personality and style of each man led to

mistakes” (59), verge on the banal and we are left no wiser as to the character traits required for high office.

It remains Nixon – evasive, yet mesmerising in his endless calculations – who provokes the book’s most stimulating passages. Has there ever been a more fascinating personality in American politics? Certainly, the reactions Nixon incites, even amongst Republicans, are remarkable. Knight labels him “one of the most dangerous men in the world” (145), Knowland describes him as “that dirty son of a bitch” (107), while Warren – believing that Nixon’s antics in 1952 prevented him from becoming President – branded his rival “a cheat, a liar, and a crook” (195). As Worthen points out, when it came to hating Nixon, “ideology was not the issue” (196). This was one politician whose personality took on enormous importance, for friend and foe alike.

As such, Worthen might have made more of Nixon’s relationship with his three Californian rivals in the context of his future presidency. It is also a pity that the book does not offer any broader analysis about what the ambitions and squabbles of these four men tell us about American political leadership. Most of all, though, this is a tremendous missed opportunity to evaluate the growing importance of California in American politics. At the conclusion of *The Young Nixon and His Rivals*, Worthen claims, “In no other era of America history was one state’s impact on national political life so great” (203). This bold assertion demands additional reflections on how and why California became the home of Republican influence – not least because this four-way prize-fight was shortly followed by the emergence of another Californian Republican with a distinctive political personality: Ronald Reagan.