

by JONATHAN AITKEN

Black Punches Back

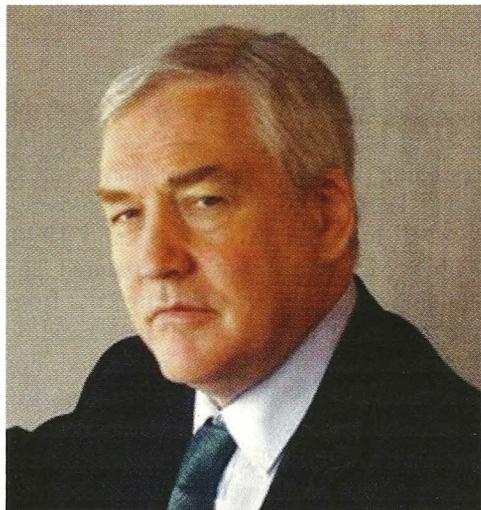
COMING BACK from death—real death—has only happened once. Its political equivalent has been almost as rare. Yet as 2013 gets under way, recent evidence highlights two examples of this phenomenon: Richard Nixon and Conrad Black.

Last month marked the 100th anniversary of Nixon's birth. Most of the centenary reassessments of his career must surely have brought a grin of pleasure to the celestial countenance of the 37th president. A savvy political prophet, he was always expecting his shares to rise on the stock market of history.

As early as 1978, I accompanied Nixon to a rowdy meeting at the Oxford Union. Fewer than four years after his resignation from the presidency, he was still at the nadir of his reputation. Tested by a hostile student questioner on Watergate, he replied: "Some people say I didn't handle it properly and they're right. I screwed it up. *Mea culpa*. But let's get on to my achievements. You'll be here in the year 2000 and we'll see how I'm regarded then."

With an eye on his legacy, Nixon spent the last phase of his life in the unique endeavor of running for ex-president. Despite intermittent taunts from his hate club, he clawed his way back to a position of eminence as a foreign policy sage and well-recognized geopolitical statesman.

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Conrad Black.

His enduring achievements begin with his ground-breaking opening of China, which brought that country out of dangerous isolation. He was the first American president to go to Moscow, where he negotiated the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty. Other Nixonian achievements, with full honor to the role played in them by Henry Kissinger, included saving Israel from near annihilation in the 1973 war and eventually signing the peace treaty with North Vietnam that ended America's disastrous military entanglement in Southeast Asia. By the time Nixon left office he had brought peace to millions, even if he had not found it for himself.

Although this record is well known, what is underestimated is Nixon's extraordinary resilience in rebuilding his historical reputation. He donned his mantle as an elder statesman—a hyperactive one—and for nearly two decades traveled, spoke, and wrote influential books and articles. This took courage and

effort. But in the end he emerged from the tomb of political death and disgrace, if not quite as another “New Nixon,” at least with a considerable measure of honor redeemed.

IT MAY NOT BE A COINCIDENCE that the Nixonian road to redemption is currently being well travelled by Conrad Black, for he is both an unabashed admirer and an acclaimed biographer of the 37th president. So it is safe to assume that Nixon’s climb back out of the depths must surely have had an influence on the trajectory that Black is now pursuing.

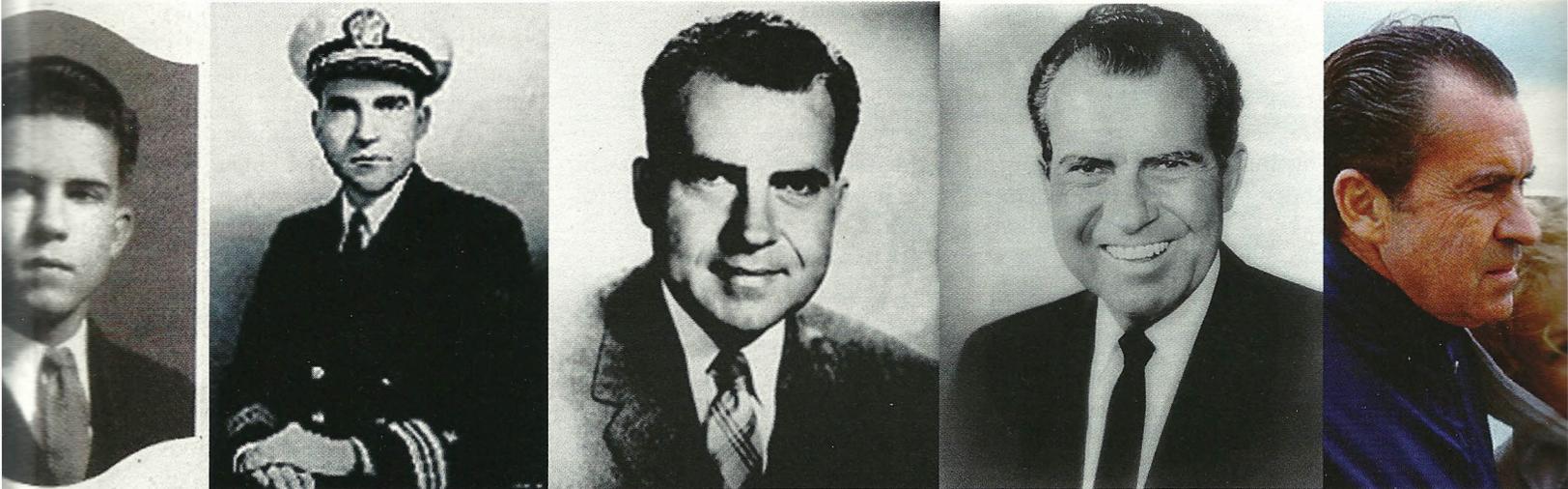
Last year Black published his memoir, *A Matter of Principle*, chronicling the saga of his extraordinary and largely successful battles with the U.S. justice system. As the book

Black denounced Rupert Murdoch as a “psychopath...like Stalin except that he doesn’t kill people.” Of his adversarial biographer Tom Bower, Black warned, “We’ll take the fillings out of his teeth and the roof off his house when we finally get around to dragging him into court here. He’s a dead man.”

If these comments seem a little over the top in the dignified columns of *The American Spectator*, it should be emphasized that Conrad Black’s primary mission in Britain was selling books—a branch of show business in which understatement wins no prizes. It reminded me of Boswell’s reply when Dr. Johnson said he’d had a good outing the previous evening: “Yes, Sir, you

Both were men who in their heyday exercised great power. Their falls were prolonged and painful. Most people subjected to such brutal reversals of fortune would have retreated quietly into obscurity to lick their wounds. But Black and Nixon found inner strength to get back into the arena, to fight on, to ignore the jabs and jokes, and both gained considerable satisfaction from winning back parts of their reputations.

But where did their inner strength come from? Black has been fueled by a burning sense of injustice against his U.S. prosecutors. Nixon, the born-again comeback specialist of six crises, lived by maxims such as “Failure is not falling down. Failure is falling down and not getting up to continue



Richard Nixon through the ages.

was well reviewed in this and many other journals, there is no need to retread the familiar ground of the story. But it is interesting to look at how Black has demonstrated his own brand of Nixonian resilience. Most impressive has been his willingness to engage in hand-to-hand combat against his adversaries in the most hostile (for him) bear pit in the world: the British press.

On a recent nine-day visit to London to promote his book, he ran the gauntlet of media adversaries with feisty aplomb. While Nixon, albeit through gritted teeth, was coldly courteous to his critics, Black took a different approach and traded insults with his interrogators. “You’re a priggish, gullible, British fool,” Black bellowed at the BBC’s top interviewer Jeremy Paxman, adding that after what he had been through it was lucky to be able to “endure discussion like this without getting up and smashing your face in.” (“Well you... go ahead and...” Paxman muttered in response.)

tossed and gored several persons.”

Conrad Black came, saw, and conquered on his return to London. The tossing and goring left blood on the carpet, some drops of it his own. But he secured good reviews and substantial media coverage, much of it favorable. His roughing up of certain media proprietors and journalists tapped into the anti-newspaper mood here induced by the News International phone hacking scandal. There was much amusement at his valedictory comment: “The London media are the lowest mutation of human life I have encountered (except for American prosecutors), and that does not exclude the many hundreds of people I met in the U.S. Federal prisons.”

Aside from the histrionics and the colorful quotes, Black’s British comeback was notable for some hidden emotions that bear comparison to those of Richard Nixon in the days of his journey toward rehabilitation.

life’s race.” Yet these explanations, though true, are too shallow.

Black and Nixon drew real sustenance from three sources: their families, their friends, and their faiths. Take a bow, Barbara Black, Pat Nixon, Julie Nixon Eisenhower, and Tricia Nixon Cox. Unsung heroes from their private friends were massively important too, particularly in Nixon’s case those much maligned praetorian guardsmen Bob Abplanalp and Bebe Rebozo.

In the faith department, Black’s Catholicism and Nixon’s Quaker roots are significant, for each would have learned that court justice, to say nothing of media justice, is not to be compared to the higher justice that awaits us all. All redemptions have a spiritual factor. I believe that Richard Nixon and Conrad Black saw this—perhaps through a glass darkly, but clearly enough to recognize that they did not recover their reputations entirely through their own endeavors. ❁