

Response

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I do not need to remind folk who are interested in matters religious and historical that human life is complicated, turbulent and difficult to systematise neatly. But the truth of this reality does not apply when it comes to finding the central problem with *Nixon's First Cover-up: the religious life of a Quaker president*, as the critiques reveal. My critics, in different ways and for different reasons, wanted me to define the word 'Quaker' with more specificity and detail when applied to Richard Milhous Nixon. Emma Lapsansky-Werner's review does not focus so squarely on this question, though its undertones lurk there also. I resist their entreaties, as understandable and appealing as they may be, because an explicit definition of Quakerism may well exclude some and include others who may or may not deserve that designation. I am not God, after all.

My working definitions were Nixon's: when he spoke of his Friendly affiliation publicly he almost always mentioned his Quaker 'heritage from my mother', the former Hannah Milhous, yet seldom referring to another fact that made him a Quaker, that he was a lifelong member of the East Whittier Friends Church in Whittier, California. Both definitions would undoubtedly satisfy Isaac Barnes May, who apparently wants the Society of Friends to become a denomination like, say, the Presbyterian Church (USA), the religious home of the currently popular US politician Donald J. Trump.

They would not satisfy Jane Calvert, or me, for I certainly and she apparently have a bit of Quaker sectarianism still adhering to us. We want Friends to be accountable to meetings or churches that take some responsibility for the decisions that govern their members' lives. That is why before I wrote of Richard Nixon's decision to join the Navy in 1942 I checked to see what his church's discipline—a word with a long and central usage among the Orthodox Friends from which his church sprang—had to say about a member's participation in war. And I also pointed to the things Nixon the college senior wrote about war and peace in his twelve capstone essays at Whittier College only eight years earlier. Both demonstrate that his decision broke with his past, or at least what that past

purported to be. No matter that a majority of Friends of his age and gender came to the same decision; his was still existentially his. And, contrary to Isaac Barnes May's assertion, I was not like historian Richard Bushman relating the truth about Mormons—although, having read a couple of his books, I think I would be in pretty good company.

I learned as long ago as an undergraduate, that a historian, like God, compiles the evidence, lays out the facts, and draws reasonable conclusions about a person's actions before coming to a judgement. That was what I attempted in my effort to understand Nixon's religious faith, but I left it for the reader to draw personal conclusions.

Because I was not writing about the political preferences of Friends generally, I did not give as much attention to them as Isaac Barnes May would wish, and I would certainly not write as he did:

Rather than being hardly a Quaker, there is a strong case to be made that Nixon was a key leader of one of the most politically powerful constituencies in his denomination, one that managed to get one of their number to the Presidency twice in the course of the twentieth century. Nixon simply was not the religious outsider as he has been portrayed.

Jane Calvert was hardly taking sides on internal Quaker matters when she reminds us that Friends considered Benjamin Franklin's posturing as a Quaker a 'deadly threat to the soul of Quakerism', something I might have used had I had a better background in eighteenth-century history. And she is certainly correct that the idea of Franklin as a Quaker is widespread, judging by another work on Nixon published this summer. Evan Thomas, in *Being Nixon* (p. 12), not only wrote that Franklin 'was the most famous Quaker of them all', but he also claimed Nixon belonged to 'no organized church' (p. 336 n.)—and I doubt he was playing on that canard that Friends are too anarchic to be organised.

The evidence I uncovered revealed no evidence that after Nixon's first three campaigns he consciously sought the votes of politically aware Quakers, and even if he had that would hardly make him a religious insider—politically astute, to be sure, but something having nothing at all to do with his religious credentials. I readily concede that he received strong support from evangelical Friends, but that speaks not to his religious faith but to his Friendly supporters' perceptions.

Neither did I undertake this study as a way of proving or disproving anything about Quakerism, contrary to Barnes May's interpretation; my concern was Nixon and his faith. Still, in such matters, there must be some standard, and historians are in an important position as collectors and stewards of a tradition that historically has employed no professional clergy to interpret a nonexistent creed. I commend Barnes May for revealing the stand of a Friend of the stature of Wilmer Cooper, as I reached that same conclusion perhaps before he did.

Emma Lapsansky-Werner also desires an expansion of what Quakerism is in my book, rightly mentioning its chameleon-like qualities, which she suggests are

ted to a specific region as well as select individuals. For Richard Nixon, himself, her question about whether his desire to keep matters of his faith private may well have reflected a lack of clarity about what was at his centre; his quotation about Fox's reference to that of God in every person, which Isaac Barnes May cites, was the only time I ever found such an explicit reference from Nixon to important matters in Quaker thought. Her proposals for future research are especially to the point and should be especially valuable for anyone looking for research topics. I certainly unite with all of them.

Let me spend a moment or two on some other questions that have come up from my generous critics, including our presider, Stephen Angell. Jane Calvert wondered whether my numerous references to Nixon as a Quaker, including the subtitle, were meant ironically. Let me just say that, given that many commentators, Friendly and unfriendly, have commented on the disparity between the thirty-seventh president's actions and his religious faith, I wanted to take advantage of any irony involved, but I did not mean the title that way. When I selected it, I thought its market might extend beyond libraries, so I worded it in a way to expand its appeal to a broad variety of interested readers, Nixon-buffs, purchasers of presidential lore, Friends (both 'liberal' and evangelical) and the mythical 'general reader'.

Stephen Angell's questions are extremely valuable, especially revealing that in his present position he is well placed to encourage students to research such important topics. Early in my research for my book—even before attending East Whittier—I wrote to fellow historian Tom Hamm to inquire about material describing programmed worship, and he told me that he could think of none. That was why Nixon's second cousin Jessamyn West was so valuable. She was also a lifelong member at East Whittier and no better in attendance than Richard. And she wrote four memoirs, all valuable, but none indexed, a fact that meant I had to turn every page. She recorded much about her church. So Angell is on target in demanding more nuance in description of programmed Friends, but I had to fend off his implication that I short-changed my readers by not dwelling more on any differences, and repeat that I was writing about Nixon's experience; as far as I know, he attended only three Friends churches other than East Whittier, Yorba Linda, Whittier's First Friends and the Portland, Oregon, Church, and I wrote something on each.

One last comment on another of Angell's queries, the one that asked me to expand on Dwight Eisenhower's desire to be the priest of the nation's civil religion and whether his Vice-President saw himself in that fashion also. Eisenhower was not a member of any church when he was baptised and became a member of the National Presbyterian Church only days after he was inaugurated, so Nixon filled in for him at the American Legion's kick-off of the 'Back to God' crusade in New York on 1 February. He certainly hoped that future presidents after him would adopt his practice of holding Sunday church services in the White House, but none has.

On that note, let me close by reminding you that there is little good to say about the Watergate cover-up that led to Nixon losing his political support in the US Congress and his subsequent resignation in August 1974. If there is a silver lining edging that dark cloud, it may be that it saved the American people from having to endure more of his wholesale attempts at bolstering civil religion, something this Friend feels a motion to celebrate, even if my Friend Richard Nixon would surely have deplored it. Despite these differences—and others unspecified here—we still are Friends, however uneasily.

I leave you there.