

Excerpt from Thomas Mallon's "Wag the Dog: The Making of Richard Nixon"
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Richard and Pat Nixon, two essentially shy people who would now both be a hundred years old, first met onstage. Each had a role in the Whittier Community Players' 1938 production of "The Dark Tower," by George S. Kaufman and Alexander Woolcott. Pat Ryan, a pretty twenty-five-year-old teacher at Whittier High, came to "The Dark Tower" with a smidgen of theatrical experience. Born in a Nevada mining-town shack and toughened by a hardworking childhood on a farm in Artesia, she had helped put herself through the University of Southern California with occasional jobs as a movie extra. But it wasn't any real enthusiasm for the stage that brought her to the Community Players. As her daughter Julie explains in a biography of her mother, she went only because the assistant superintendent at Whittier High asked her to, and she "found it difficult to say no to a school administrator." Nixon took to the whole business and several months later was back for more. At the urging of the Players' director, he went on to appear in "Night of January 16th," a melodrama by Ayn Rand in which the text itself chewed the scenery.

Pat Nixon, in later years, gave three memorably painful on-camera performances opposite Richard Nixon. In each of them, she was without lines of her own, but her mute, stricken countenance became an important part of the historical impression being created and preserved. On the last of these occasions, standing in the East Room of the White House on August 9, 1974, as her husband said farewell to his staff, she managed to avoid the tears that had flooded her eyes during a previous broadcast agony, her husband's tentative concession to John F. Kennedy on Election Night, 1960.

But Pat Nixon's presence and expression were most critical at the first of these televised displays, the one that took place at the El Capitan Theatre, in Los Angeles, on September 23, 1952. The surviving film of her husband's "Checkers" speech shows her on-camera, her jaw supportively set, for only seconds each time, as Nixon rebuts the accusation imperilling his campaign for the Vice-Presidency on a ticket headed by General Dwight D. Eisenhower. "SECRET RICH MEN'S TRUST FUND KEEPS NIXON IN STYLE FAR BEYOND HIS SALARY" was the *New York Post's* headline a few days before. Not so, Nixon now argued, and more or less proved to the television audience, by laying out everything he and his wife owned and owed: "I have no life insurance whatever on Pat. . . . I owe 4,500 dollars to the Riggs Bank in Washington, D. C., with interest four and a half per cent. I owe 3,500 dollars to my parents. . . ."

Though he was nowhere near the theatre, Checkers, a canine present from a supporter, stole the show. "Regardless of what they say about it," Nixon insisted of the dog, "we're gonna keep it." Checkers joined forces with Pat's cloth coat ("I always tell her that she'd look good in anything") to insure the candidate's continued place on the ticket. Heartwarming or revolting—take your pick—the speech was indisputably effective, and it might never have been given at all had Pat Nixon not overridden her husband's last-minute attack of stage fright. "I just don't think I can go through with this one," he told her three minutes before the camera's red light went on. "Of course you can," she replied, thereby extending his political life for more than two decades. The speech was a grand slam—Nixon celebrated its anniversary every year, even after Watergate—but Pat Nixon loathed politics from that televised moment on.

The origins of the Checkers episode can probably be traced to Nixon's run-in with Earl Warren, the governor of California, who four years earlier had been Thomas E. Dewey's running mate and sixteen years later swore in Richard Nixon as the thirty-seventh President of the United States. In the summer of 1952, Warren had positioned himself as a favorite-son candidate for President, but his control of the California delegation was threatened by Senator Nixon's attempts to maneuver it into the Eisenhower camp. Two months after the Republican Convention, a still disgruntled Warren supporter may have leaked the story of Nixon's "secret fund" to the *Post*.

Soon the much tonier New York *Herald Tribune* was chiming in, and causing Nixon's biggest problems. Having long clamored for an Eisenhower nomination, this editorial avatar of liberal Republicanism now called for the General's Vice-Presidential pick to get off the ticket. Advisers close to Eisenhower, ones much deeper inside the Party and financial establishments than the young, mortgaged, and stridently anti-Communist Senator, urged the same course. Eisenhower stayed largely silent on the matter for days, not even telephoning his running mate, though he did drop a quotable remark that Nixon would need to prove himself to be as "clean as a hound's tooth" if he wanted to remain on the ballot. When the General finally did call, a thoroughly agitated Nixon told the architect of the Normandy landings that it was time to "shit or get off the pot." By the conversation's end, however, the General still wanted the Senator to go on television to explain the whole matter.

Eisenhower scarcely understood the power of the weaponry that he was inviting Nixon to bring onto the field. But a couple of Nixon's allies, his bruising tactician Murray Chotiner and a political P.R. man named Robert Humphreys, instinctively grasped that television was about to alter politics as thoroughly as the nuclear option had recently

changed military strategy. With money from various Republican campaign committees, they secured Nixon thirty minutes of airtime following Milton Berle on the Tuesday-night TV lineup. For the next couple of days, Nixon mostly secluded himself—already his customary crisis mode—and prepared. Then, shortly before the broadcast, a phone call from Governor Dewey, who, for all his establishment credentials, had been a real Nixon supporter, threw the candidate into a tailspin. Dewey regretted to tell him that Eisenhower’s closest aides believed the TV speech should conclude with Nixon’s resignation from the ticket. The candidate, as furious as he was shaken, hung up after instructing Dewey to tell everyone around Eisenhower that “I know something about politics, too!”

He also knew some oratorical tricks. Nixon’s speech was meant to be overly detailed—its disclosure of private financial minutiae was, he assured his audience, “unprecedented in the history of American politics”—but he also employed a technique perhaps picked up from some long-ago listening to Marc Antony’s funeral oration for Caesar. Before pointing out that Pat Nixon, who’d taught stenography at Whittier High, had often worked without pay in his Senate office, he informed viewers that his opponent for the Vice-Presidency, Alabama’s Senator John Sparkman, “does have his wife on the payroll. . . . That’s his business and I’m not critical of him for doing that. You will have to pass judgment on that particular point.”

Mostly, though, the speech laid out the humdrum economies of a man whose ambitions ran to political advancement, not wealth. “For four years we lived in an apartment in Park Fairfax in Alexandria, Virginia,” he declared. “The rent was eighty dollars a month.” The speech was so replete with specifics that Nixon wound up running out of the time that had been purchased from NBC. He did manage his bold stroke—telling viewers that they

should write or wire the Republican National Committee with their opinion of whether he should remain on the ticket—but the network cut off this Hail Mary pass in mid-flight. Nixon didn't have a chance to give out the R.N.C.'s address before NBC returned to its regularly scheduled programming.

The letters and telegrams and phone calls were vastly in his favor, and they somehow found their way to the committee. And yet Eisenhower seemed to continue his dithering. No decision came, and Nixon, feeling that he could take no more, composed a letter of resignation that Chotiner promptly ripped up. He told Nixon not to obey Eisenhower's summons to come and discuss the situation in Wheeling, West Virginia, where the General was campaigning, but to go off to Missoula, Montana, and resume his own barnstorming. This was going rogue with a vengeance, and it worked. Nixon travelled to Wheeling only after he got assurances that he would remain on the ticket. The groundswell from the speech had by this time risen so high that Eisenhower went out to the Wheeling airport to tell his much younger partner, "You're my boy." Nixon, exhausted by the ordeal, was photographed weeping on the shoulder of California's other senator, William Knowland, whom the Eisenhower campaign had been keeping close by as a possible replacement for its original choice of a running mate.