

Cambridge University Press

0521827531 - The Tragic Vision of Politics: Ethics, Interests and Orders

Richard Ned Lebow

Excerpt

[More information](#)

1 Nixon in hell

Hell was nothing like Richard Nixon thought it would be, not that he had thought much about it when he was “upside.” That was the term everyone here used to describe the world in which they had once lived. It was an ironic reference to the ancient and erroneous belief that Hell was subterranean. As far as anyone could figure out, it wasn’t anywhere in relation to earth. But in every other way it was undeniably the “downside,” so the term stuck.

On the few occasions that Nixon had thought about Hell – usually during interminable church services that presidents feel compelled to attend – he imagined fire and brimstone and little red devils with spears and evil grins, swishing their tails in delight when they made tortured souls writhe in agony. Hell may once have been like that – opinion among “lifers” was divided – but over the centuries it had evolved to reflect lessons the devil and his assistants had learned from observing life on earth. Not that they lacked imagination, but when it came to torture, human beings showed an ingenuity and dedication that the devil found inspiring. So Hell was frequently remodeled to take advantage of the latest in human innovation. Some time back, the devil had installed an ornate, wrought-iron gate with the words *Arbeit macht frei* [work makes you free] across the top. Scuttlebutt had it that his assistants were now upgrading modules to incorporate the latest in computer graphics technology. Virtual torture would free more assistants for administrative tasks, always a crushing burden in eras of extraordinary growth.

Nixon entered Hell through the devil’s gate, and being a well-read man, understood its significance all too well. Inside, his attention was drawn to an officer in a smartly tailored SS uniform barking out orders to *Kapos* – prisoners who worked for the camp authorities in return for special privileges. They used their bull whips to separate terrified newcomers into two groups and herd them off in different directions. Nixon and about twenty other souls were marched off through the mud to one of the hundreds of squat, wooden barracks that formed a grid on the seemingly endless

Cambridge University Press

0521827531 - The Tragic Vision of Politics: Ethics, Interests and Orders

Richard Ned Lebow

Excerpt

[More information](#)

2 The Tragic Vision of Politics

plain. The sky was gray and the fast moving, low clouds gave the camp something of a two-dimensional quality. Dressed in a tropical weight suit Nixon began to shiver.

The barracks smelled something fierce, but they were warm. The SS guard escorting them shouted something in German that Nixon did not understand. An old man, lying on one of the bottom bunks, looked up and explained in heavily accented English that Nixon was expected to undress and change into one of the blue and white striped uniforms stacked in two neat piles in a corner of the barracks. Nixon looked around and saw a few of his group beginning to shed their clothes. He had always been uncomfortable about undressing in front of other people, and in his student days had usually managed to find some ruse to avoid changing in locker rooms. The whip exploded in the air in front of Nixon's face and involuntarily he jumped back in fright. The guard shouted at him, and Nixon took off his jacket and fumbled with his tie.

The two-piece uniform was stiff and uncomfortable, but had been freshly laundered. The pants were too tight, and the jacket was at least two sizes too large. The contrast with his argyle socks and supple Italian shoes was striking. The old man told him that the bunk above his was unoccupied, and that he should take it. To Nixon, all the bunks looked unoccupied, but then he realized that nobody came here with luggage or personal effects. He wondered how he would brush his teeth; he looked around and noticed there was no sink.

"Where do I wash up?" he asked.

The old man smiled. "You don't."

"What did I do to deserve this? I'm not a Jew! Why have they sent me here? There must have been a mistake . . . unless one of those reporters was responsible for this."

"Relax," the old man said. "Nobody here is Jewish or Gypsy. Beelzebub is sadistic but not insensitive."

"Or else he has a wicked sense of humor," volunteered another man.

Nixon turned to address him. "What do you mean?"

"Think about it," he said. "No Jews or Sinta, but a permanent work force of former guards or petty officials at Nazi concentration camps, or people somehow connected with Hitler's campaigns of extermination. They are treated like shit, and there's no hope of liberation." He shook his head. "Endless cycles of hard labor and beatings. Freezing in the winter, roasting in the summer."

"I'd slit my throat," Nixon volunteered.

"You can't," the second man said. That's the beauty of it. Nobody dies here, because you're already dead! There's no way out unless they ship you off somewhere."

Cambridge University Press

0521827531 - The Tragic Vision of Politics: Ethics, Interests and Orders

Richard Ned Lebow

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Nixon in hell

3

Nixon's voice grew animated. "You mean some people leave here alive?"

"Alive? Let's not get into that one. But yes, people, most of them, leave. The place looks like Auschwitz-Birkenau, but it is a processing center, not a death camp. Most new arrivals stay here no longer than a week or two. They get shoved into cattle cars for resettlement elsewhere."

Nixon gave him a quizzical look. "So it's Auschwitz in reverse?"

"More or less. It's a devilishly clever scheme, don't you agree?"

The conversation was interrupted by the return of the other inhabitants of the barracks. They passed through the door one at a time, trudged across its floor of bare wooden planking and sought out their bunks in silence. Nixon looked at them in horror.

"It's OK," said the old man reading his thoughts. "They're sinners like you and me."

"Sinners, you say?"

"Mass murderers."

"Murderers? I'm not a murderer!"

The door opened again and a detail of *Kapos* pushed through a wheelbarrow that contained two large, covered, metal cauldrons. Inmates rose from their bunks, grabbed their tin bowls and quickly lined up to be served a thin gruel and chunks of stale, pale-gray-colored bread. Nixon was hungry but revolted by the smell of the gruel and could not bring himself to go through the chow line. He stood in front of his bunk thinking about suppers on his terrace overlooking the Pacific. "What I wouldn't give for a bowl of cottage cheese and ketchup!" he said to himself.

The old man consumed his gruel with enthusiasm and used a piece of bread to soak up whatever liquid was left in the bottom of his bowl. Nixon watched him in amazement. Just like an animal, he thought. The old man popped the last piece of bread into his mouth and replaced his empty bowl on a nail sticking out from the side of his bunk. Nixon waited from him to get into his bunk before resuming their conversation.

"You said this is a camp for mass murderers?"

"That's right. Everyone here is guilty of it in some way, directly or indirectly. I could have saved Jews during the Holocaust. The man who spoke to you earlier helped to plan the fire bombing of Tokyo." The old man pointed to the bunk above Heinrich. "They're inseparable buddies."

"I didn't kill anybody!"

"Nobody wants to think of himself as a murderer."

A *Kapo* arrived with a footstool and positioned it under one of four naked bulbs that provided illumination to the windowless barracks. He had to unscrew each bulb from its socket; they were very hot and he could only give them a quick twist before removing his hand. It took five or six

Cambridge University Press

0521827531 - The Tragic Vision of Politics: Ethics, Interests and Orders

Richard Ned Lebow

Excerpt

[More information](#)

4 The Tragic Vision of Politics

tries before the first bulb flickered and went out. The *Kapo* blew on his fingers to ease the pain before moving the stool into position under the next bulb. When the barracks was dark, the *Kapo* left, and Nixon heard the sound of a padlock being attached to the door.

"They lock us in for the night?" he asked the old man.

"Not that there's anywhere to go."

"What if I have to go to the bathroom? I have a weak bladder."

"You'd better learn to control it."

"There's no john in the barracks?"

"I think you should go to bed," the old man said.

Nixon gingerly raised his foot and put it on the wooden frame of the old man's bunk to get a better purchase on his own bunk. He grabbed the side board above and tried twice without success to pull himself up. He waited to catch his breath before trying again.

The old man suggested that he grab one end of the frame and hook his leg over the other end. "Then you should be able to pull yourself up and roll over on to the mattress."

"Maybe I'll just sleep on the floor."

"Go ahead . . . if you don't mind the rats."

Nixon thought about this for a minute, and decided to give it one more try. He followed the old man's instructions and after some effort made it into the bunk. He eased his tired body on to the lumpy, straw-filled mattress. There was no pillow.

The days that followed were miserable. Nixon was infested with lice and fleas, and scratching his bites only made them itch more. He ate nothing for two days and tried to ignore his hunger pangs. On the third day, cramps and severe stomach pains forced him into the chow line. He had been assigned to a work team that dug holes for the foundations of new barracks. It was back-breaking work, especially for somebody out of shape and suffering from phlebitis. After his first fifteen minutes of digging, he thought he was going to faint. He let his shovel drop and tried to steady himself while gasping for air. One of the *Kapos* in charge of the work detail, a round-faced Asian, shouted at him in a language Nixon thought might be Chinese. He understood that he was supposed to resume work, but he was unable to move. The *Kapo* addressed him again and then lashed out with his coiled whip. Nixon felt its leather tip draw across his buttocks and was then overcome by an intense burning sensation. Somehow, his body found the energy to bend down to pick up the shovel.

Nixon struggled to come to terms with his situation. At first he hoped it was just a particularly vivid nightmare. He gave that idea up after being abruptly awakened from a real dream the next morning by a *Kapo*

Cambridge University Press

0521827531 - The Tragic Vision of Politics: Ethics, Interests and Orders

Richard Ned Lebow

Excerpt

[More information](#)

marching through the barracks shaking a cow bell. He was mustered out of his bunk and the barracks and marched to the common latrine and showers. No dream, he decided, could have a smell so ugly and penetrating.

Nixon responded with anger. The devil had no right to punish him this way. He was not a mass murderer; character assassination was his biggest sin. If he was here, where were Kennedy and Johnson? Those two were real criminals, he told himself. Kennedy had stolen the White House from him in 1960 by having the Daley machine stuff all those ballot boxes in Cook County. He was a fool for persuading his supporters that it was against the national interest to challenge the election in the courts. And that egomaniac Johnson dragged the country into a useless war in Vietnam. It took him and Henry four years to get out with honor, and we would have done it sooner too if those [expletive deleted] Democrats hadn't stirred up the hippies and tried to block our every move in Congress. Nixon began to think that Kennedy had bested him again. He had carefully cultivated his relationship with Billy Graham, but the Kennedy clan had all those cardinals eating out of their hands, even the Vatican. Maybe they got the pope to pull strings to send him here? Just the kind of thing they would do!

Nixon was also unhappy about the way he was being treated in Hell. Maybe he was a sinner, although assuredly not a murderer, but he was also a VIP. Nobody had met him at the gate, not that he expected old Lucifer himself. But the devil could have sent a couple of his chief assistants. Brezhnev must be here – Mao too. The thought was strangely comforting. He would have to ask them what kind of reception they had received. He wondered how they were holding up; he had difficulty imagining either of them digging ditches. For the first time since he had entered Hell, Nixon broke into a grin.

The old man with the Italian accent aside, nobody had briefed him about Hell. That would have been one of the perks of VIP treatment. He allowed himself to remember how attentive, well-dressed assistants and officers in crew cuts and perfectly pressed uniforms had fawned over him, anxiously soliciting his approval for memos, schedules and itineraries, even what to serve at state dinners. In Hell he was anonymous and powerless. Nobody deferred to him or told him anything, unless it was an order, and then it was usually barked in German or Chinese. Once Nixon had screwed up his courage to talk back. He had demanded that the *Kapo* marching his group off to a work site take him to whoever was in charge. The *Kapo* told him to shut up – or so Nixon assumed from his tone of voice – but he continued to insist that he speak to someone in authority. The *Kapo* shrugged his shoulders and summoned a colleague to take over

Cambridge University Press

0521827531 - The Tragic Vision of Politics: Ethics, Interests and Orders

Richard Ned Lebow

Excerpt

[More information](#)

6 The Tragic Vision of Politics

the work detail. He led Nixon off in a different direction to a small hut at some distance from any of the barracks. Nixon rehearsed the speech he would make, but never got the chance. Two *Kapos* appeared from nowhere with and began to beat him with rubber hoses. Nixon remembered absorbing a number of painful blows before losing consciousness.

After his beating, Nixon withdrew from camp life as much as possible and sought refuge in memories of pleasant upside moments. He went through the motions of morning ablution, work, meals, free time, until he found release in sleep. His social interactions were limited to perfunctory conversations with the old man. Inner exile helped Nixon to preserve his dignity, and he almost convinced himself that reality was his mental reveries, not servitude in a concentration camp. Every afternoon when his work detail finished, Nixon always managed to lead the procession back to the barracks. He would walk smartly up the steps and nod his head ever so slightly in acknowledgment to an imaginary band leader who struck up "Hail to the Chief" as soon as the president came into view.

Nixon's coping strategy was ultimately defeated by curiosity. He had an alert and inquiring mind that could only be suppressed for so long. It surreptitiously stored and processed information from his new environment, awaiting a propitious moment to intrude on his inner self. Nixon was vaguely aware that part of his mind was insubordinate and impossible to control fully. He nicknamed this corner of his mind "Henry," and chose to tolerate it as long as it did not interfere with his fantasy life. This uneasy accommodation lasted for some time; Nixon really did not know for how long, nor did he care. Time's arrow was a tool used by the mind to order memories and expectations to cope with the world that Nixon had rejected.

He was brought back to reality by recognition of a familiar face. He had been digging an irrigation trench alongside a newly constructed barracks when another work detail passed by struggling to push wheelbarrows laden with bags of cement across the damp and uneven ground. The high-pitched scraping sound of the wheels was as penetrating as it was unpleasant, and Nixon involuntarily looked up to identify the source of the annoyance. His subconscious mind registered the scene and the face of the *Kapo* hurrying the work detail along and filed it away for subsequent analysis. Later that afternoon Nixon was resting in his bunk having just finished a long replay of the banquet Mao Tse-tung had held in his honor in the Great Hall of the People. He had not enjoyed the food – too much spice and too many vegetables – but he reveled in being the center of attention, not only of Mao, but of the entire world. He was especially pleased that Mao had directed most of his questions about America

Cambridge University Press

0521827531 - The Tragic Vision of Politics: Ethics, Interests and Orders

Richard Ned Lebow

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Nixon in hell

7

to him rather than to Henry, and that this had been picked up by the press.

Nixon's mind went blank while his memory banks uploaded scenes from his favorite film, *Around the World in Eighty Days*. His subconscious chose this moment to intervene, and signaled Nixon that it had sighted someone he knew. Nixon summoned up the image of the work detail in preference to the movie. The *Kapo's* face was indeed familiar, but he could not put a name to it. He had never been good at recalling names, and it was always more difficult to do so when he encountered people out of context. Nixon wondered if anyone would recognize him. He had grown leaner, and as far as he could tell – there was no mirror in the barracks – he had lost most of his double chin. For some reason, neither his hair nor nails had grown, and he pulled his fingers across his cheek to confirm that his skin was smooth and lacking his tell-tale afternoon stubble. For the next hour or so he played over the scene in his mind's eye. The long, angular face with deep-set eyes was definitely somebody he knew from his political past, when they were both much younger, he thought. It bothered him that he could not identify the man, and decided to do what he could to get another glimpse of him.

To do this, Nixon had to take a more active interest in camp life and began to engage the old man in more animated discussion.

"I was worried about you," the old man confided.

"About me?," Nixon asked.

"Yes. A lot of people never come out of withdrawal. They don't want to face the truth."

"What truth?"

"You need to find the answer to that yourself, my son."

Nixon began to wonder if he was the only sane person in the barracks. He absent-mindedly plucked a louse from beneath his shirt and calmly crushed it between his fingers. "How long have you been here old man?"

"Not very long. Twenty or thirty years. I don't rightly know."

"You don't know?"

"No. It's not important."

Nixon pondered his answer and decided not to pursue the line of questioning any further in the expectation that he would find any clarification even more depressing. Instead, he guided the conversation toward the camp and the work detail he had witnessed that morning. He learned that it contained upward of 50,000 souls, who provided the labor force used to maintain and expand the camp. Ever since he had arrived, the old man explained, expansion had been under way, and there were rumors that this was only one of many concentration camps.

Cambridge University Press

0521827531 - The Tragic Vision of Politics: Ethics, Interests and Orders

Richard Ned Lebow

Excerpt

[More information](#)

8 The Tragic Vision of Politics

Nixon still hoped he might be one of the fortunate people in transit. Where would they send him? He remembered a newspaper column by that bastard Buchwald that proposed he be sentenced to an eternity in high school as punishment for Watergate. That would be just fine, he thought. There would be no back-breaking labor in high school, but recesses and hot school lunches. He salivated at the thought of the latter. Were there still hot lunches, or was it one of the programs his administration had cut? Nixon felt an unusual pang of guilt.

The old man interrupted his reverie. "If you were in transit, you would have been out of here already. You're one of us."

"What do you mean, one of us?"

"I told you when you first arrived. Everyone here is guilty in some way of mass murder."

"Now let me say this about that. . . ."

The old man raised his hand with an air of practiced authority and Nixon stopped in mid-sentence.

"As far as I can tell," the old man explained in a matter-of-fact tone of voice, "we have been divided into three groups. The largest number of people are those who abetted mass murder indirectly. They are people like Lou, who knew at the time it was wrong to calculate the distribution of incendiaries most likely to create a massive firestorm over Tokyo. Or, Hwang-ho, who, for a small bribe, told the Chinese authorities where anti-communist refugees were hiding. They were all slaughtered. There's even the odd spy who sold or gave away secrets that led to peoples' deaths. They work as laborers or do chores around the camp, like serving food and doing laundry."

"Laundry," Nixon said. "I've been in these clothes since I arrived. They're absolutely filthy!"

"*Piano, piano*," the old man said, using his mother tongue with Nixon for the first time. "Everything here takes time, and you have lots of it before you."

At a loss for words, Nixon looked down at his feet. His favorite shoes were all but unrecognizable. If only he had known, he would have been buried in Goretex-lined hiking boots. The Egyptians had the right idea, he thought. They buried their dead with everything they were expected to need in the afterlife, although sandals would not last long here. He wondered why he had seen no Egyptians; everybody here was modern, although they came from every corner of the globe. In due course, he would have to ask the old man.

"Some people ultimately leave; where they go I don't know." The old man made the sign of the cross. "The second group consists of people who actually committed atrocities. They do hard labor; I

Cambridge University Press

0521827531 - The Tragic Vision of Politics: Ethics, Interests and Orders

Richard Ned Lebow

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Nixon in hell

9

explained that to you earlier. The third group are the most serious offenders. They ordered or planned mass murder, or, like me, were in a position to stop it at little risk to themselves and failed to do so. They spend some time as *Kapos*, and are compelled to beat and torture other inmates."

"What sort of punishment is that?," Nixon asked.

"Think about it," the old man suggested. "For the most part these are people who see themselves, or used to anyway, as decent, even god-fearing folk. Many of them were caring parents, respectful of their neighbors and invariably kind to their pets. Did you ever notice that people are on the whole kinder to animals than they are to each other? Even when we slaughter animals for food, we try to do it as quickly and painlessly as possible."

"There are animal activists who would disagree," Nixon suggested.

"I know. There are people here who killed people to protect animals. Also people who killed to prevent abortion."

"You were telling me about punishment," Nixon reminded the old man.

"You're right, I digress. But there's really no reason to hurry. Some mass murderers are Sadists. But most are not, and pride themselves on having led exemplary lives. The violence they committed was never first-hand, so it was easy for them to deny responsibility. To the extent they thought about it, they convinced themselves they were merely cogs in the wheel or, if they were near to the apex of authority, that their behavior was compelled by reasons of state."

"It often is."

The old man ignored Nixon's comment. "Here in Hell, they get the opportunity to experience violence first-hand."

"I know. I've been beaten."

"No, you still don't understand. *You* get to beat people."

"What do you mean?," Nixon asked.

"In due course, they'll teach you to beat and torture people without doing too much damage to their internal organs. Just like medical school, you practice on dummies before you do it to real people."

"You're kidding!"

"I never joke," the old man said. "I wish I could. I think I would have had a happier life."

"I'm not known for my sense of humor either."

The old man lowered his voice, not that anybody was listening. "You get to beat other inmates, usually with truncheons or rubber hoses, but sometimes with your bare fists."

"I couldn't do that."

Cambridge University Press

0521827531 - The Tragic Vision of Politics: Ethics, Interests and Orders

Richard Ned Lebow

Excerpt

[More information](#)

10 The Tragic Vision of Politics

"Oh yes, you can," the old man insisted. "You will not only pummel people but burn them with cigarettes and shock them with cattle prods and metal clamps you attach to their nipples and testicles."

"I'll refuse!"

The old man shook his head and regarded Nixon with a look of pity. "It won't work. I said no at first. They frog-marched me to the outskirts of the camp and forced me into a hole just wide enough to accommodate me standing up. They kept me there for two days, without food or water, while water seeped in up to the level of my knees. I was still recalcitrant, so they thrashed me. I held out until they explained how they were going to force a glass catheter up my urethra and then manhandle my penis so that the catheter splintered into numerous fragments. They said the pain would be excruciating for years to come whenever I urinated."

Nixon shuddered and tried to push from his mind the image of a glass tube being rammed up his penis. He wouldn't even wish such a fate on the owners of the *Washington Post*.

The old man shook his head. "I even lack the courage to be a martyr. So I agreed to do what they wanted. At first it wasn't too awful. I worked over some newcomers with hoses. I tried not to hit them too hard, but the *Kapos* saw that I was holding back and threatened me with the catheter unless I lashed out with all my strength. It was awful. I beat the victims into unconsciousness."

"I know what that feels like," Nixon said.

"Believe me, it's pretty terrible on the giving end too. I thought they would let me go after a few beatings, but it only got worse. Each time I was pushed into doing something worse. They made me do unspeakable things." The old man crossed himself again.

"How long did this go on?"

"I don't know. In the end, they had me garrotte a young man until his face turned blue and he collapsed. They told me I had killed him."

Nixon frowned. "I thought you said nobody died here?"

The old man shrugged his shoulders. "Every night I see his contorted face with his tongue sticking out and hear the gurgling sound he made as he struggled unsuccessfully to draw in air. Now I know what it means to be a murderer."

Hard labor, simple food and the absence of coffee and alcohol had worked wonders for Nixon's body. He had lost weight and his blood circulation had improved. He had also become increasingly inured to the fleas and lice that colonized his mattress and hair, and rarely bothered to scratch his bites. That night, Nixon lay awake in his bunk – into which he now easily climbed – thinking about what the old man had told him. He