Richard Nixon is the most pathological of postwar American presidents, though the competition is fierce. Journalist John Osborne recalled that “reporters who followed and observed Nixon as closely as I tried to do so in part because, way down and in some instances not so far down in their consciousness, there was a feeling that he might go bats in front of them at any time” (Osborne, 1975, p. 5). No president has better exemplified what Richard Hofstadter termed the paranoid style in American politics, perhaps because no president edged so close to clinical paranoia. Nixon’s pathology no doubt helps explain the exceptional attention he has drawn, not only from biographers and historians, but from novelists, playwrights, poets, filmmakers, and even one major composer (John Adams). Nixon haunts postwar culture as he haunts postwar politics.

But lurking in these multimedia portraits of psychosis in power is the suspicion that – strange as he was – Nixon embodied deep-seated and widespread American dreams and nightmares. As Gore Vidal put it, “As individuals presidents are accidental; but as types, they are inevitable and represent, God help us, us. We are Nixon; he is us” (Vidal, 1970, p. 58).

No one has better captured the us that was Nixon than Garry Wills in *Nixon Agonistes*. Published in 1970 – well before Watergate – *Nixon Agonistes* propelled Wills to prominence in American intellectual life (Wills, [1970] 1979). There he has remained over the course of an extraordinary career that has witnessed exceptional books on subjects ranging from St. Augustine to Shakespeare to John Wayne, from the American founding to the Gettysburg Address to contemporary Catholicism. Not least of Wills’s books are fine studies centering on two other postwar presidents, John Kennedy (*The Kennedy Imprisonment*) and Ronald Reagan (*Reagan’s America*). Yet neither can compare to *Nixon Agonistes*, arguably the most revelatory book on a postwar president. That it is out of print says less about the book than about a political culture understandably wary of owning up to Wills’s Nixon. Better the pathetic lush of Oliver Stone’s *Nixon*, on whom we may invest the distancing contempt of pity, than a Nixon who mirrors the republic.

Wills’s Nixon is, to be sure, plenty strange. The book opens on the eve of the 1968 Republican primary in Wisconsin, and features an account of Wills’s telling interview with Nixon on a plane bound for Chicago, in which the candidate chose to sit shrouded in darkness as if seeking respite from the face-time of public life in
which his face was a liability. Having himself offered a cruel anatomy of Nixon’s visage (“when he smiles, the space under his nose rolls up [and in] like the old sunshades hung on front porches”), Wills remarks sympathetically that Nixon “must be aware that people vote for him despite his appearance; he speaks, always across a barrier. To carry that barrier about with one, to be that barrier, must introduce a painful complexity into one’s approach toward fickle things like television and reporters and New Hampshire voters” (pp. 25, 29). Nixon was at war with himself as well as his enemies. The latest and newest “Nixon” whom he willed into being for the campaign moved with “unintended syncopation,” unable to shake older Nixons “jerking still at one part of his frame or face” (pp. 22–3).

Yet for Wills, Nixon’s strangeness was the consequence not of that which divided him from his fellow Americans, but of the manner in which he caricatured a deep-seated national creed. This creed, Wills argues, is liberalism. Liberalism, as Wills sees it, is “the philosophy of the marketplace, and America is distinguished by a ‘market’ mode of thought in all its public (and even private) life, a mode that is Nixon through and through” (p. ix). At the heart of liberalism lay an “emulative ethic” that held that “proving oneself in the free arena of competition is the test of manhood, truth, and political wisdom” (p. 531). This was the ethic of the individualist, of the “striver.” This was the agon of the self-made man. Nixon – “so totally this sweaty moral self-doubting self-made bustling brooding type” – was its Samson (p. 531). Nixon’s “pure expression” of the emulative ethic of the market “made him an eccentric at the center of our national experience, the individual as a social measure, our aberrant norm” (p. vii).

Nixon Agonistes is a full-throated attack on this aberrant norm, “a lover’s quarrel with my country,” Wills calls it (p. x). Because Wills was no less a reporter than a political theorist, his assault on liberalism was launched as much by the particulars of reportage as by the abstractions of theoretical debate. Trained at Yale as a classicist in the early 1960s while making ends meet as a freelance writer, Wills was denied tenure at Johns Hopkins in 1966 for refusing to abandon journalism. Turning then to full-time reporting, he had by the late 1960s found a place among the stable of “new journalists” working for editor Harold Hayes at Esquire. Nixon Agonistes grew out of assignments for this and other popular magazines. Hence throughout the book Wills moves “from observed particulars to argued generalities,” seeking to keep the argument “based cumulatively upon observed detail, on small things widely known and discussed, analyzed and shared, things summonable still to the mind’s inquest” (p. x).

As a reporter, Wills offers incisive accounts of the 1968 campaign and party conventions (including a gripping first-hand report on the oft-ignored “other riot” in the black neighborhoods of Miami during the GOP gathering, as well as the oft-described police assault on demonstrators later in Chicago). A carefully crafted portrait of Nixon’s life and thought makes the case that he personified the liberal market ethos. But Wills also provides acid-etched sketches of other major political figures of the 1960s, including Spiro Agnew (“a guided missile, swung into place, aimed, activated, launched with the minute calculation that marks Nixon” [p. 257]); Daniel Berrigan (“he wears a clerical suit with a black turtleneck pullover, like an ecclesiastical U-boat commander” [p. 51]); Barry Goldwater (“he had an inferiority simplex – the plain knowledge, never shirked, that he is a lightweight” [p. 235]); Richard
Goodwin ("a Left-Wing Roy Cohn" [p. 474]); George McGovern ("pinching oratory through his stone smile" [p. 365]); Daniel Moynihan ("he obviously thinks an urbanist should be urbane – the bow tie and startled eyebrow arcs bend toward others at cocktail parties as the florid raconteur nudges his points home" [p. 474]); Nelson Rockefeller ("black comedy Falstaff, not only disastrous in himself, but the cause of disaster in others" [p. 183]); and George Wallace ("he has a dingy attractive air of a B-movie idol, the kind who plays a handsome garage attendant" [p. 56]).

Not the least of the virtues of *Nixon Agonistes* is its provocative panorama of the political culture of the 1960s. Precisely by centering Nixon, Wills better explains him.

Wills mobilizes his particulars in service of a blistering attack on four idealized markets that he argues underpin liberalism: the moral market, the economic market, the marketplace of ideas, and the political market. Each imagines a self-regulating mechanism that produces happy results, be it the triumph of the striving puritan, the success of the competitive entrepreneur, the adoption of the best idea, or the election of the superior candidate for office (or, internationally, a concert of self-determining nations). For all their differences, each of these markets inscribes the emulative ethic: “All our liberal values track back to a mystique of the earner” (p. 529).

Putting his Jesuit education to good use, Wills demonstrates in exquisite detail that none of these markets works as promised. The moral market celebrates an impossible self-sufficiency. The economic market supposes an unlikely efficiency. The marketplace of ideas invests in an impossible neutrality. The political market favors mediocrity at home and a corrosive combination of nationalism and imperialism abroad. The market mode of thought, Wills concludes, is less logical than mythological.

Wills realizes that the liberalism he speaks of is – as a whole – the “classical liberalism” of the nineteenth century and he struggles with its fracturing in the twentieth century. Those who adhere most closely to its tenets in the United States we call “libertarian conservatives.” American “liberals” are commonly thought to be those who have their doubts about the virtues of unregulated economic markets. Even Nixon, whom Wills argues was trying to reassemble the classical liberal creed, cannot be said to have been a friend of academic freedom, and his was the one peacetime administration to institute wage and price controls on the economic market. Wills would have been on more solid ground simply to insist that market modes of thought and the emulative ethic had – in one form or another – penetrated the political thought of liberals and conservatives alike in twentieth-century America.

It was difficult, that is, for Wills to find anyone who believed in all four idealized markets, but it was easy enough to find at all points on the political spectrum those who believed in one or another of them. And liberals and conservatives alike were wedded to the emulative ethic, even when they disagreed about its implications for public policy. This shared worldview Wills brings home brilliantly in a meditation on the peculiarity of the metaphors of the “race” and the “starting line” which have ruled American thinking about distributive justice:

The Left has stressed equality of opportunity. The Right has stressed opportunity to achieve. Yet each side allows for considerable adjustment. The Left, as it addresses the
voter, stresses that welfare is meant to “put a man on his feet,” so he can be a productive competitor; and its strongest argument for governmental intervention is that welfare should not be considered a “dole,” an act of charity, but a basic right – the right, that is, to an equal place at the starting line. And the Right does not deny the need to help some men get started; it just argues points of fact (i.e., does this or that welfare scheme destroy initiative instead of creating it?). Such a debate is not only inevitable but endless, once one accepts the metaphor of the starting line. Does a man begin the race at birth? Or when he enters school? When he enters the work force? When he attempts to open a business of his own? Or is the starting line at each of these points? And if so, then why not at all the intermediate points as well? And how does one correlate this man’s starting line (or lines) with the staggered, endlessly multiplied starting lines of every other individual? How do we manage the endless stopping of the race involved in starting it so often? One second after the gun has sounded, new athletes pop up all over the field, the field itself changes shape, and we must call everybody in, to line them up once more. We never get to surmise where, in this science-fiction world of continual starting and racing, the finish line might be. Or, rather, the staggered, infinite finishing lines for each runner. The metaphor is a mess. (p. 274)

Here, in his inquisition against the emulative ethic of competitive individualism, Wills is devastating to “liberals” and “conservatives” alike. By the end of the book, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. (his favorite “liberal” whipping boy) is no less bloodied than Nixon. Wills’s own political theory is all too implicit in his book, revealed only in an occasional vague reference to “the great lack in our political theory – its blindness to the facts of community life” (p. 543). Wills was – and is – a quirky Catholic conservative of the Burkan – or, better, Augustinian – sort. He began his career in the late 1950s as a key contributor to William F. Buckley’s National Review. By 1970, he had been banished by his right-wing comrades for apostasy, above all on the matter of anti-communist absolutism – the chapter attacking the justification, or lack thereof, for the war in Vietnam is one of the highlights of Nixon Agonistes. But although the National Review signaled its horror with Wills in a 1973 cover featuring his head on the body of Huey P. Newton, Wills has remained true to the conservativism he had sketched in an early essay on “The Convenient State” (1964). Wills uses “convenience” in an older sense of “coming together,” and he argues that the point of the state and of politics is not justice but social peace. He came to admire disruptive “prophets,” like Martin Luther King, who called their fellow citizens to greater justice, but he nonetheless believes that those politicians are best who negotiate imperfect compromises that serve stability and comity. As Wills sees it, the greatest rewards of human experience are to be found not in the solitary striving of one sort of market or another, but in the interdependent social bonds (sometimes hierarchical) of civil society – in families, neighborhoods, churches, unions, and voluntary associations. Nixon Agonistes was perhaps the first of the important “communitarian” attacks on liberal individualism, which in the work of intellectuals such as Benjamin Barber, Jean Bethke Elshstain, Christopher Lasch, Alisdair MacIntyre, Michael Sandel, and Michael Walzer form such a prominent part of American political thought (if not American politics) of the last thirty years. And it remains one of the best.

Wills took comfort in the signs he thought he saw all around him in the late 1960s that the market myths had run their course. Discontented African Americans and
young people appeared to reject them, while the members of the “silent majority” gave vent to a resentment at this discontent that, Wills contended, only thinly veiled their own disappointment that things did not work out as the myths had promised. Nixon, himself seething with “a continued sense of grievance,” was the candidate of their faded values and resentment (p. vii). He was the “last liberal” (p. 534). Nixon’s ascent to the presidency was thus proof of the bankruptcy of the emulative ethic – surely the markets were awry if this was the leader they threw up. “Nixon’s victory was the nation’s concession of defeat, an admission that we have no politics left but the old individualism, a web of myths that have lost their magic” (p. 536).

Here Wills was wrong, as he later admitted. Myths, as he well knew, might readily survive rational scrutiny, even scrutiny as intense as that he provided. There proved life aplenty in market modes of thought. The rapid eclipse of the American left, which began shortly after Nixon Agonistes was published, witnessed a shift of American political discourse back toward the “classical liberalism” he thought was on its last legs. Like Nixon himself, the ethos he embodied was rehabilitated in the two decades after Watergate. Market logic now reigns supreme under the sign of “globalization,” and a Democratic president has triangulated his way to a welfare reform act that forces impoverished single mothers to lace up their track shoes and join the emulative race from which they had once been exempt. One is more likely to find Americans today who embrace all of Wills’s four markets than one would have in 1970. Ironically, Nixon Agonistes is a book all the more worth reading because Nixon was not the last liberal.

REFERENCES