

THE CURRENT CINEMA

SPECTACLES

"The Grandmaster," "Drinking Buddies," "Our Nixon."

BY DAVID DENBY

Watergate has never really gone away for those of us who lived through it, and, in Penny Lane's "Our Nixon," a shrewdly edited collection of news footage and "home movies" taken by members of the Nixon White House staff, there they are again, our familiars: Dwight Chapin, the clean-cut, stolid special assistant who hired the dirty trickster Donald Segretti; the chief of staff, H. R. (Bob) Haldeman, calculating, bland, inarticulate, with a malevolent upper lip and a forced bright smile; John Ehrlichman, fraudulent, ironic, the most intelligent member of this semi-fascist apparatus; and the President himself, at times masterful, at other times desperate, alcoholic, and sad. Most of the footage taken by the staff is of no distinction—the two Inaugurations, state visits to Italy and China, and the like. One moment, long forgotten, stands out: at a White House entertainment in 1972, as the Vietnam War is raging, a female vocalist with the super-square Ray Conniff Singers holds up a protest sign and says, into a mike,

"President Nixon, stop bombing human beings, animals, and vegetation." The singer, Carole Feraci, unnamed in the movie, is an obscure, noble claimant to immortality.

Stuck with this mostly ordinary tourist stuff, Penny Lane resorted to the Oval Office audiotapes, especially the late-night telephone calls, when Nixon, deep in Watergate and seeking reassurance from his henchmen that all is well, finally runs into a brick wall: Ehrlichman tells him that, yes, he did inform the President about the existence of the secret police force, the Plumbers, and the Plumbers' theft of medical records belonging to Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist. Nixon insists that he knows nothing, stops, loses his way, and then, realizing that his staff will no longer take the fall for him, collapses into an embarrassed silence (both Haldeman and Ehrlichman were fired soon afterward). This moment is as devastating an impression of a powerful man facing the end as we are ever likely to have. ♦

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Richard Brody blogs about movies.