



Filmmakers Brian Frye and Penny Lane and editor Francisco Bello work on the forthcoming documentary 'Our Nixon' in Mr. Bello's his studio in Queens.

Philip Montgomery for The Wall Street Journal

# Nixon at Home, Kissinger on the Beach

BY NICOLAS RAPOLD

Four decades after the Watergate scandal and two weeks after what would have been Richard Nixon's 99th birthday, it's still hard to beat the Nixon Administration when it comes to first-hand chronicles of power and its misuse. Thanks to the 37th president's fondness for recording conversations, the Watergate tapes have provided invaluable fodder for countless journalistic, academic and criminal investigations.

But as a pair of local filmmakers have learned, there was another, more mundane and familiar sort of documentation also going on in Nixon's White House, and its eager producers were men whose names are recalled by many with feelings of betrayal, criminality or both: Chief of Staff H.R. Haldeman, Chief Domestic Advisor John Ehrlichman and Special Assistant to the President Dwight Chapin.

Convicts? Yes. Ardent enthusiasts of Super-8 home movies? Apparently—and shooting the sort of mugging (Johnny Cash in the East Room!), touring (fun at the Great Wall of China!) and general horsing around (relaxing on the beach with Henry Kissinger!) that you might recognize from your grandfather's dusty box of reels.

"The common conception of them is as these evil schemers. But no one's evil in home movies," said Brian L. Frye, half of the married filmmaking duo behind the found-footage documentary "Our Nixon." "Everyone's happy, everyone's cheerful. Instead of a trio of evil schemers, you see a bunch of guys in swimsuits mugging for the camera."

Mr. Frye, who also teaches law at Hofstra, and his wife, Penny Lane, a visiting professor of filmmaking at Bard, are cur-



Richard and Pat Nixon, as seen in the Super-8 footage of 'Our Nixon.'

rently working with editor Francisco Bello to finish a rough cut of "Our Nixon" by the spring. Their subject matter is hard for any American voyeur to resist: 204 forgotten reels of raw Super-8 source material shot in Nixon's inner-sanctum between 1969 and 1973.

The home movies were initially confiscated by the FBI (along with the more famous 3,700 hours of tape recordings), then languished at the Nixon Presidential Library and Museum in Yorba Linda, Calif. Taking its shape from this footage, and augmented by audio from public sources, "Our Nixon" has earned the couple grants from State Council for the Arts, the Tribeca Film Institute, Cinereach and the Jerome Foundation.

The initial investment came out of the artists' own pockets: After Mr. Frye learned of the material from filmmaker and preservationist Bill Brand (who had been commissioned to preserve it), he fronted \$17,000 for a video transfer that organized the hundreds of hours of little-seen footage into workable form.

"It wasn't accessible, and we knew we wanted to do something with it," Ms. Lane said.

"We paid for the video transfer to be made—sight unseen—hoping it was good, in 2010. As soon as we saw it, we knew what the movie would be."

For Mr. Frye and Ms. Lane, the home movies offered a personal look at a period defined in monumental terms by history books and broad memories. The

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filmmakers talk of Messrs. Haldeman, Ehrlichman, Chapin, and others with the fondness and vividness of screenwriters conjuring well-developed characters. As for the fallen commander in chief—who was captured on film by his staff yet never operated the camera himself—he becomes "the center of 'Our Nixon' without being the main character," said Ms. Lane.

The couple's fidelity to perspective might surprise viewers expecting, for example, satire (à la Emile De Antonio's found-

footage documentary "Milhouse") or revisionist fantasia (Oliver Stone's "Nixon").

"Forty years later it's easy to assume that we can find the seeds of everything," Ms. Lane said. "They didn't experience it that way at all. They saw it as a train that hit them. We want to honor that experience of it while not taking sides in the debate about the proper reading of Watergate."

She singled out one remarkable shot of Ehrlichman, who would eventually serve 18 months in prison, pointing at and razing a newspaper headline blaring his involvement in the Watergate break-ins. For the filmmakers, who divide their time between Park Slope and upstate New York, the project does extend beyond the cinematic and into the archival. They plan to make a preservation-quality digital copy of the Super-8 films next month, using the cost-efficient Kinetta scanner invented by Jeff Kreines (a co-director of the superb 1983 high-school documentary "Seventeen"). The goal is a high-resolution, public-domain resource for many more years of snooping and sorting.

"We've been able to do side-by-side comparisons, and it's night and day," Ms. Lane said. "They're zooming in on a notebook, and I'm like, 'You can't read that, why are they zooming in on that?' Oh, because you *could* read that [originally] and it says, 'The president's trip to China....'"

Led by that instinct, the duo has joined a tradition of filmmakers who make something new out of something old.

"Other filmmakers like to be out with a crew," Ms. Lane said. "We love the archival research, we love the chase, when you find something in the archive that you know no one has ever seen. I don't know why no one made this movie before."