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# *Crazy Rhythm*

*My Journey from Brooklyn, Jazz, and Wall Street to Nixon's White House, Watergate and Beyond*

By Leonard Garment

Reviewed by Roger A. Stetter

*Crazy Rhythm: My Journey from Brooklyn, Jazz, and Wall Street to Nixon's White House, Watergate, and Beyond* by Leonard Garment. Times Books, 448 pp., \$27.50.

This is the story of a uniquely gifted lawyer. The youngest son of Jewish immigrant parents, he began his career as a jazz saxophonist, "squeezed through the keyhole of the tightly closed Gentile fraternity of Wall Street lawyers," went on to become counsel for President Nixon during the Watergate crisis and emerged as a consummate defender of politicians in trouble, including Attorney General Ed Meese, former National Security Advisor Bud McFarlane and Supreme Court Justice nominee Robert Bork. Beginning his memoir, Garment writes that as a boy growing up in the 1930s, "I was prepared to fail cheerfully at anything."

Many readers will be drawn to the book by Garment's fascinating portrait of Richard Nixon. He was "a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma" (to use Churchill's phrase). Garment met Nixon when he came to New York to join his Wall Street law firm (Mudge Rose Guthrie & Alexander) in 1963. He

writes that "Nixon decided to move from California to the exotic precincts of New York City . . . to make a fresh political start in a new location." Already Mudge Rose's chief of litigation at age 39, Garment had run out of steam and was looking for a new challenge:

I couldn't have cared less that Richard Nixon was the political Antichrist of eastern liberalism. He was also an opening to a different life and the possibility of salvation.

At his first private meeting with Nixon, Garment talked about the case of *Time v. Hill*. Garment had won a large jury award on behalf of the Hill family based upon a false account of their hostage ordeal published by *Life* magazine in 1955. Nixon remarked that the magazine "didn't give a good goddamn" about the Hills and was "only interested in selling its goddamn magazine." Nixon went on: "All that fancy First Amendment talk — just a lot of pious 'bullshit' while they exploit the hell out of you." It was in the *Hill* case that Nixon later made his first appearance before the U.S. Supreme Court in 1965. He lost the appeal due to

a bitter internal struggle between Justices Hugo Black and Abe Fortas, which was brought to light many years later, after previously secret draft opinions in major Warren Court cases were made public. Upon learning of his defeat, Nixon remarked, "I always knew I wouldn't be permitted to win a big appeal against the press."

Garment became a chief architect in Nixon's political comeback and successful run for the presidency in 1968. The 1968 presidential election was razor close and "Nixon's mysteriously disappearing lead made it necessary to throw everything into the breach." Nixon's television advisory group, which included Garment, produced a documentary for the campaign that told Nixon's life story. But Nixon thought the documentary was overly sentimental and refused to even look at the finished product. Garment writes, "[w]e were reluctantly allowed to use the film — if the Nixon family's friend [the Rev.] Billy Graham personally approved it." The anecdote illustrates the complex, often contradictory, character of Richard Nixon — at once a hard-boiled politician and a devout Quaker. Looking back on his life, Garment describes the late President as the "flawed, furiously human Richard Nixon, a man of dark nightmares and optimistic dreams."

The story of Watergate, yet another of the "great crises" in the Nixon legend, reveals Nixon at his worst. Ignoring Garment's advice to clean house after news of the Watergate break-in and cover-up had become a media obsession, Nixon decided to manage his Watergate defense personally (*i.e.*, "He would be his own lawyer"), thinking that Watergate was a "political struggle, not a legal contest." As matters deteriorated, Nixon withdrew into a shell. He turned over the Watergate tapes to Sam Ervin's Senate Watergate Committee in the belief, nurtured by his ex-chief of staff Bob Haldeman, that the tapes would exonerate him. Garment writes that:

... the gusher of sanctimonious horror that the tape transcripts pro-

duced from politicians and editorial writers, as well as the effect on the public, stunned Nixon. A serious student of Disraeli, he had overlooked one of Disraeli's central dicta, that a national leader, whatever he did or said in private, had to present a decent face in public.

Nixon regained his composure after giving his resignation speech. He called Garment around midnight to say goodbye and thanks. Then Nixon queried, "They'll indict me, won't they?" Without paying attention to Garment's answer, Nixon continued; "[J]ail isn't so bad. It's a good place to think and write. Gandhi, Lenin — a lot of those fellows did their best work in prison."

While the Nixon saga is fascinating, the real story is about Garment's life. He played jazz sax in the Blue Room of the Roosevelt Hotel in New Orleans in 1944, ran with an avant-garde crowd in the early 1950s, including Mel Brooks, Neil Simon and Woody Allen, and hosted a 70th birthday party for jazz great Duke Ellington at the White House.

Garment's memoir contains a richly detailed portrait of his mother and father. Garment had a tumultuous relationship with his father, a dress manufacturer who worked incredibly hard and had little social time to spend with his family. Garment has finally made peace with his father. He writes:

Now I hear his voice in my voice, and in the morning mirror I see his face emerging in mine. In my long postmortem conversation with him, I've come to know him better and even become his friend.

More problematic is Garment's struggle to come to terms with the death of his first wife, Grace, after they left Washington and returned to New York. Grace was a beautiful and talented woman who wrote the television script for *The Edge of Night*, a daytime soap opera, and suffered from manic-depressive illness. A well-groomed woman

wearing a mink coat, she disappeared one day, taking the train to Boston and ending her life in a shabby hotel located across from the train station in that city. After her mysterious disappearance and suicide, which are described in harrowing detail, Garment asks himself the question:

And where was I during the years of Grace's downward spiral? Working, of course, frequently seven days and nights a week, like my father — and, like him, happy to leave the scut work of child rearing to Grace and her cadre of Caribbean helpers, doing occasional sandbox or Coney Island duty and feeling noble about it.

But Garment is no more responsible for Grace's death than for Nixon's self-immolation in Watergate. Both of them, tormented by inner demons, fled from reality beyond the help of loved ones and friends.

Garment's story does have a happy ending. In 1937, he dropped out of Hebrew school and missed his bar mitzvah. Almost 60 years later, however, Garment read from the Torah and played his clarinet joyously at the bat mitzvah celebration for his daughter Annie.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Roger A. Stetter received his undergraduate degree, with honors, from Cornell University in 1968 and his law degree in 1971 from the University of Virginia Law School. Before entering private practice in New Orleans, he was a law professor at Louisiana State University Law Center and an antitrust litigator for the Wall Street law firm of Mudge Rose, et al., where he came to know and work with Leonard Garment. (Lemle & Kelleher, L.L.P., 21st Flr., Pan-American Life Center, 601 Poydras St., New Orleans, La. 70130-6097)

