

An administration under fire over covert wiretapping, whistleblowers hailed as heroes and lambasted as traitors, a president's reputation on the line ... You could be excused for detecting a whiff of Nixon-era sulphur in the US political atmosphere these days. With the trial of Bradley Manning, the Department of Justice's pursuit of journalists who use national-security sources and, of course, Edward Snowden's revelations of NSA data harvesting filling the headlines, state-sanctioned subterfuge and divisive whistleblowing dominate US politics more than at any time since the days of the Pentagon Papers and Watergate.

It's an opportune moment, therefore, to re-examine the surveillance culture of the Nixon administration. A timely new documentary allows us to do so from a unique perspective: from the men closest to Nixon, through the lenses of their own cameras. Our Nixon, showing this month at Open City Docs Fest in London, draws on almost 30 hours of unseen Super 8 footage shot inside the White House, and on international state visits, by Nixon's chief of staff HR Haldeman, domestic affairs adviser John Ehrlichman and special assistant Dwight Chapin.

All three men would serve time for Watergate-related offences, but these aren't the film journals of moustache-twirling conspirators: they show men messing around at their desks, birds hopping on the White House lawn, Henry Kissinger eating cake. There are no smoking-gun revelations and Nixon himself appears only fleetingly. It all adds up to a disarmingly personable account of an environment that, to many liberals, has come to represent the depths of machiavellian skullduggery; less "Gotcha" than "Boy, are they in for a surprise".

"People come to the movie thinking they're going to see footage of Nixon breaking into the Watergate hotel," says director Penny Lane. "But it's just so goofy! The combination of the innocuous, sweet, humanising nature of home movies as a concept with knowing it was the Nixon administration - those two things together we knew would be interesting. It all looks different from that position." As producer Brian L Frye puts it: "These guys fully believed this would be the greatest thing they ever did in their lives. They wanted to document it for their families."

Our Nixon intercuts this up-close-and-personal footage with material from the White House phone tapes secretly recorded by Nixon, news reports and later interviews with the three staffers themselves to create a picture of the



A new documentary compiles home movies from the 70s White House. But it's less a portrait of Tricky Dicky than a disarmingly personable insight into all the president's men. By **Ben Walters**

CAUGHT: NIXON ON SUPER 8



**Think West
Wing, Mad
Men and
The Office;
and finally
the dog
days of the
Death Star**

presidency from the inside, from initial optimism right up until the wheels came off. Watergate - now more or less synonymous with the entire administration - barely constitutes background noise until almost the end of the affair.

Rather, the priorities are trying to shape the US and the world, and dealing with a president who, surprising as it might seem today, was idolised by his staff as a vehicle for hope and change. In terms of on-screen comparisons, think conservative West Wing with a dash of Mad Men; then a high-stakes version of The Office once Nixon's more needy and neurotic tendencies become evident; then dejected home movies from the dog days of the Death Star.

Lane was drawn to the material for its human rather than its political

Goofing around: Dwight Chapin films Haldeman filming him; Nixon (below)

interest. Despite starting with a broadly negative idea of the Nixon administration ("like, 'Who are these weird villains? They're such squares!'", she became increasingly intrigued by the nuances of the people she came to think of as "our guys".

"Haldeman and Ehrlichman get lumped together a lot in history but they're such different personalities," she says. "You see it in the footage. Haldeman's was really precise. He would film the same thing three times. He would decide he was going to pan from that crane to that building; he would do it, and then he would do it again if he didn't do it right the first time. Ehrlichman was much more casual and much more likely to film people and animals. Every time you see bird footage, you know it's Ehrlichman. Chapin was all about his goofy friends."

The tone grows more serious as the scale of the Watergate scandal becomes clear and the inevitability of the administration's collapse sinks in. Nixon's disgrace traumatised US culture but, a generation on, is there room for re-evaluation? "In America, we use [Watergate] as a benchmark for the worst [abuses of presidential power]," notes Lane. "But is it? It was illegal, absolutely, but it's harassment of Nixon's political enemies. It's all kind of petty. Maybe the real question would be: was this different from any other presidency or did they just get caught?"

It's a question with particular resonance now. "We look back at Nixon as the most evil president in recent memory, but they believed they were doing the right thing, and I'm sure the same is true of the people in the Obama administration," says Frye, who is also a law professor. "When you're the one wielding the power, it's always easy to rationalise the way you use it - and to have the hubris to assume your activities will never come back to bite you."

However the current controversies over secrets and lies in high places play out, we are unlikely ever to see an equivalent documentary - Our Obama? - based on smartphone videos from today's West Wing. After Watergate, Frye notes, "Congress passed laws saying any [video] material created by White House staff was government property. The upshot is that, if you work for the president, you create nothing without official authorisation. So nothing like this will happen again."

i Our Nixon screens on 21 and 22 June at the Curzon Soho, London W1D (opencitydocsfest.com, 020-7679 4907).