Summary Article: NIXON, RICHARD M.
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Thirty-seventh President of the United States

Richard Milhous Nixon dominated American politics from the 1950s through the 1970s. A man of great contradictions, he was a misanthrope in a people-person's profession. He won the largest combined tally of votes ever, running five times on a national ticket, while millions despised him. A slash-and-burn partisan anticommunist in the 1950s, when he earned the nickname "Tricky Dick," he won the presidency in 1968 as the healing "new Nixon." His election anticipated the conservative revolution, even as his administration furthered Great Society liberalism. As president from 1969 to 1974, he expanded presidential power dramatically while undermining presidential credibility, thanks to his lies during the Vietnam War and cover-up crimes amid the Watergate scandal. Reflecting his roller-coaster career, Nixon engineered a landslide reelection in 1972, yet two years later he became the first president to resign from office.

A Fighting Quaker

The second of Frank and Hannah Nixon's five sons, Richard Nixon grew up a Quaker in Yorba Linda, California, in a home that his father assembled from a mail-order kit. An intense young man with grand ambitions—and an equally large chip on his shoulder—Nixon worked his way through school. He graduated from the local Quaker institution, Whittier College, in 1934, then moved east to attend Duke University Law School. His resentment of the Ivy League "Harvards," who in his eyes always had it easy, would fuel his political career. This resentment connected him to what he would call the "silent majority" of working-class, law-and-order Americans during the 1960s, but the anger also proved self-destructive.

Nixon followed a path familiar to many of the "greatest generation." Once America entered World War II, he worked as an attorney in the Office of Emergency Management in Washington, D.C. He joined the Navy in August 1942 and served in the Pacific until honorably discharged as a lieutenant commander in January 1946. Unlike numerous other political contemporaries, such as "Tailgunner Joe" McCarthy and Lyndon Johnson, who exaggerated their wartime service, Nixon bonded with millions of demobilized servicemen by being nonchalant about having done his duty.

After the war, the Nixons returned to Southern California. Local businessmen encouraged the young...
up-and-comer to run for Congress as a Republican against an incumbent Democrat, Jerry Voorhis. Representing America's proud victory and glorious future, Nixon won. He entered Congress in January 1947, befriend ing another decommissioned naval officer, John F. Kennedy.

In Congress, Nixon became famous by fighting communism. Nixon and other crusaders uncovered some Communists, including the Harvard-trained, silky-smooth, well-connected State Department traitor, Alger Hiss. But these "Red-baiters" also destroyed people's reputations unfairly and poisoned the political atmosphere in the late 1940s and 1950s.

The Hiss case, in particular, fed Nixon's resentments against the Eastern establishment, while also propelling him into the Senate in late 1950, and then onto Dwight Eisenhower's Republican presidential ticket in 1952. The joy of the nomination soured when reporters accused Nixon of benefiting from an $18,000 senatorial slush fund. Confronting demands that he resign from the ticket, Nixon pioneered a new American political ritual, redemption through television. In a half-hour speech watched by 60 million people, Nixon bared his soul—and his finances. He said he lived modestly, like most veterans, speaking their new language of mortgages and GI policies. He created a new political shorthand by saying his wife Pat did not dress in mink but wore "a respectable Republican cloth coat." The one gift he confessed to accepting, a cocker spaniel named Checkers, was for his two girls, Tricia and Julie. No one, Nixon vowed, would ever take away that beloved dog. Nixon's maudlin performance in the "Checkers Speech" saved his career, forging his reputation as the master of this powerful new political medium that brought politicians into Americans' living rooms.

As vice president from 1953 to 1961, Nixon served as Eisenhower's junior statesman—particularly when Eisenhower's health faltered. He was a model young American, with a beautiful wife, two daughters, and utter reliability. Nixon became a hero to many when he and Pat gracefully endured violent anti-American protests on a 1958 trip to Peru and Venezuela. But Nixon also served as Eisenhower's partisan hatchet man, intensifying liberal Democrats' hatred.

Nixon's prominence secured the Republican presidential nomination in 1960. Confident in his mastery of television, he agreed to four debates against his Democratic rival, John F. Kennedy. This time, Nixon's intensity, and his visible nervousness, sweaty brow, darting eyes, and aggressive debater's pose, backfired. Kennedy appeared to be the new generation's eloquent, unruffled voice. Yet even with Kennedy's debating victory and Nixon's quixotic, chaotic, cross-country trips to fulfill his promise to campaign in all 50 states, Nixon almost won. The slim victory margin, combined with suspicions about the votes counted by Mayor Richard Daley's heavily Catholic, Democratic machine in Illinois and Lyndon Johnson's cronies in Texas, convinced Nixon he was robbed. When he lost what should have been an easy comeback campaign to become California's governor in 1962, Nixon retired from politics in a huff, telling his many journalistic adversaries, "You won't have Nixon to kick around any more, because, gentlemen, this is my last press conference."

Shortly thereafter, Nixon moved to New York, becoming a wealthy Fifth Avenue lawyer, all the while planning another comeback. The electoral humiliation of the Republicans in 1964, when the conservative ideologue Senator Barry Goldwater captured the nomination, let Nixon reemerge as a pragmatic, experienced statesman. During the 1966 midterm elections, Nixon campaigned tirelessly for fellow Republicans. Approaching the stormy 1968 presidential election, Richard Nixon, the bulldog of American politics, packaged himself as the "new Nixon," mellow, mature, and ready to heal America while restoring peace in Vietnam with honor, along with law and order amid the chaos of the 1960s.
The "New Nixon" Becomes President

Student protests, Vietnam, and the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy, along with the Chicago riots at the Democratic National Convention, made 1968 a traumatic year. Nixon appeared tougher than his Democratic rival, Vice Pres. Hubert H. Humphrey, and more reasonable than the race-baiting third-party candidate, Gov. George Wallace of Alabama. Nixon's clever, television-based strategy was immortalized as the "selling of the president," in the telling phrase of Joe McGinniss, a young reporter who followed Nixon's admen image-makers. Thus, during the liberal rebellion's supposed high point, America elected a conservative president, anticipating the longer-lasting "Reagan Revolution."

Richard Nixon wanted to be as popular as the martyred John Kennedy while governing effectively. America's efforts to contain communism had bogged down in Vietnam's jungles. Nixon faced a hostile Democratic Congress, a divided country buffeted by social and ideological revolution, and an economic crisis, as the demands of the expanded Great Society government and fighting a war strained America's resources. Nixon fancied himself a healer, but he remained a street fighter.

Nixon's presidency is often summarized with two simplistic slogans. Many say, "Great foreign policy but disastrous domestic policy," remembering his visits to the Soviet Union and China on the one hand, and his Watergate crimes on the other. Others say, "For a conservative, he was surprisingly liberal." Both phrases capture some paradoxes of Nixon's presidency: how the famous Cold Warrior warmed relations with Communist nations, and how liberals' great enemy expanded many Democratic Great Society programs. But both remarks miss the pathological dynamics that destroyed Nixon's presidency and rocked America. The four years that the Nixon administration remained in Vietnam radicalized students and triggered Nixon's overreactions, which further poisoned the atmosphere, culminating in the Watergate scandal.

"Operation Breakfast," the code name for the secret bombing of North Vietnamese supply routes and bases in Cambodia initiated in March 1969, epitomized Nixon's biggest political problem. Nixon knew that using B-52 bombers to carpet-bomb Vietnam's neutral neighbor would inflame the already intense domestic opposition. The government lied to its own computers to avoid detection. By May, Nixon would order FBI wiretaps to discover who leaked this secret operation to reporters. By October, the renewed protests would culminate in the Vietnam Moratorium, a day of antiwar demonstrations involving an estimated 2 million protesters nationwide. Six months later, on May 4, 1970, shortly after Nixon publicly announced the bombing of Cambodia, nervous National Guardsmen at Kent State University in Ohio fired into a crowd of protesters, killing four students and wounding nine others.

As Nixon infuriated Democrats, he also tried mollifying them. In July 1969, the "Nixon Doctrine" promised military aid but not troops to Asian anticommunists. By the fall, Nixon's Vietnamization policy began replacing American troops with South Vietnamese soldiers.

Domestically, Nixon—and the rest of the government—continued building the welfare state that Lyndon Johnson had expanded. Nixon's Family Assistance Plan, announced on August 8, 1969, sought to bypass America's welfare bureaucracies by offering direct payments to the poor to provide a guaranteed minimum income. The initiative reflected Nixon's "New Federalist" desire to shrink the federal government—by building up state and local governments, if necessary. Decades ahead of its time politically, the proposal triggered bipartisan opposition. Conservatives rejected such direct subsidies. Liberals, who instinctively mistrusted Nixon, were lobbied heavily by government bureaucrats and social...
workers fighting for their jobs. As a result, the plan died. However, it reflected Nixon's true vision, along with the toxic politics that surrounded him and preserved the welfare-state status quo.

A political weather vane, Nixon subsequently mastered the language of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society, adding the occasional conservative accent. He reassured Republicans of his commitment to fostering "individual responsibility and individual dignity," using code words to criticize collectivist New Deal welfare statism. But as a pragmatist concerned with foreign policy and handcuffed by Democratic majorities in both houses of Congress, Nixon increased big government. Spending on social programs under Nixon soared from $55 billion, constituting 28 percent of the budget, to $132 billion, or 40 percent of the budget. The Federal Register listing of governmental regulations, which grew 19 percent under Johnson, grew 121 percent under Nixon, as the government became more enmeshed in enforcing civil rights, regulating the environment, and distributing health, education, and welfare services.

By 1973, a Republican Party document listing more than fifty accomplishments of the Nixon administration read like the Lyndon Johnson big government wish list. Nixon created the Environmental Protection Agency, an office of child development, and the Cabinet Committee on Opportunities for Spanish-Speaking People. The number of needy children receiving free or low-cost school lunches tripled, from 2,864,624 in 1968 to 8,845,846 in 1973, and food stamp recipients quadrupled, from 2.9 million in 1969 to 12.4 million in 1973.

**Immoderate Politics and Centrist Policies**

Nixon's immoderate, kill-or-be-killed politics undermined his centrist policies. Conservatives bristled at his big government giveaways while cheering his red-meat partisanship. Meanwhile, Nixon's attempt to reconcile with 1960s liberalism failed to impress Democrats or reporters, who were emerging as modern politics' great arbiters. "We obviously aren't getting any credit on the environmental initiatives we have undertaken," the president glumly reported in 1970 (Richard Nixon to H. R. Haldeman, December 1, 1970, Nixon Presidential Materials Project). Nixon was disappointed, having signed the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 on January 1, 1970, as the "first official act of the decade."

Nixon also did not get credit for supporting civil rights, as he opposed the Supreme Court decisions authorizing busing students from one neighborhood to another to achieve integration. Nor did he advance the cause of women much, beyond making a few token appointments. Still, he did support school desegregation. Most significantly, he supported the Philadelphia Plan, which set goals for hiring minorities in heavily segregated unions. This plan grew into the controversial "affirmative action" program, whose partial Republican pedigree has usually been overlooked.

In June 1971, the New York Times began publishing the "Pentagon Papers," a leaked copy of a secret government report detailing how America stumbled into Vietnam. The revelations mostly embarrassed the rival Kennedy and Johnson administrations. Yet, as the government's chief executive officer, Nixon took this breach personally.

The case was a turning point in the emergence of the independent, even defiant, national media. Using the First Amendment guarantee of press freedom to make what was called the "Fourth Estate" untouchable, reporters started acting like a fourth branch of government checking the executive, legislative, and judicial branches. Nixon considered these journalists to be Harvard and Georgetown snobs acting more like a subversive fifth column. To him, publishing leaked government documents during wartime, amid a student rebellion he considered the greatest domestic crisis since the Civil War,
was treasonous. Furious, Nixon approved a new White House Special Investigations Unit, nicknamed the "Plumbers Unit," mandated to plug leaks.

Nixon ran for reelection seeking vindication. He would build on the "Southern Strategy." Southern whites had supported Democrats as the states' rights party since the Civil War. But with Democrats advancing civil rights—and liberalism in general—Nixon wanted to break the Solid South and realign American politics.

Nixon and the Republicans also benefited from the Democrats' bitter 1972 primary battle. In an upset, an antiwar insurgent who mastered the arcane popular nomination rules (because he helped draft them) captured the nomination. Republicans would tag the Democratic nominee, Sen. George McGovern of South Dakota, as the candidate of "amnesty, abortion, and acid," identifying McGovern with the antiwar crusade, the sexual revolution, hippies, drugs, and Black Power.

Nixon also solidified his prospects of reelection with two historic breakthroughs. On February 21, thanks to National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger's indefatigable efforts and Mao Zedong's desire to distinguish between Chinese and Soviet Communism, Nixon visited China. The trip ended a quarter century of diplomatic quarantine of what he had called "Red China" in favor of the small Chinese Nationalist enclave on Taiwan. This shift helped thaw the Cold War and welcomed the world's largest country into the family of nations.

Three months later, Nixon's visit to Moscow launched the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks, SALT. This détente strategy by Nixon and Kissinger confused conservatives, who had spent decades demonizing communism; and liberals, who had spent decades demonizing Nixon. Critics blinded by fury and bruised by the sharp-elbow politics failed to understand Nixon's passion for foreign policy and his statesmanlike vision. A master strategist who sought nuclear stability with a clever mix of peacemaking and war making, Nixon wanted to be remembered as a statesman who was bold enough to take risks for peace but shrewd enough to be respected by his adversaries. Nixon also understood that he had the domestic credibility to engage the Communist governments of China and the Soviet Union. In that spirit, he balanced the bombing of Cambodia with his creative policy of Vietnamization. He tempered his anticommunist rhetoric with diplomatic jaunts across the Iron Curtain.

With such Republican political strengths and Democratic weaknesses, Nixon did not need skullduggery to secure reelection. Even many reporters ignored a bizarre break-in at Democratic headquarters at the Watergate office and hotel complex in Washington, D.C. But some of the five burglars arrested on June 17, 1972, had address books with phone numbers linking them to White House officials, and Americans would soon discover that they were part of the Plumbers Unit.

Still, Watergate was a minor embarrassment as the president coasted to a landslide reelection victory. Richard Nixon, the angry tribune of Middle America, won a record 47.2 million votes, constituting 60.8 percent of the popular vote, and 520 electoral votes. No other candidate would win more popular votes until 1984, when Ronald Reagan won 54 million votes.

Nixon began his second term promising to heal the nation. Three days later, on January 23, 1972, Nixon beamed as the United States signed the Paris Peace Accords, supposedly ending the Vietnam War.

The Watergate Debacle

Eventually, the mounting legal and journalistic investigations uncovered serious crimes. On March 21,
1973, the White House counsel John Dean told the president and his chief of staff, H. R. Haldeman, that the cover-up of White House ties to the burglars was a "cancer on the presidency." On April 30, Dean, Haldeman, John D. Ehrlichman (the president's chief domestic policy aide), and Attorney Gen. Richard Kleindienst all resigned because of their respective roles in the cover-up. The next day, the Senate approved the appointment of a Watergate special prosecutor. During the summer, Americans carefully watched the Senate Select Committee to Investigate Campaign Practices interrogate the president's men about this White House crime wave. Senator Howard Baker, a Republican from Tennessee, would help set the standard for investigating this and subsequent scandals, asking repeatedly, "What did the president know and when did he know it?" The hearings unexpectedly uncovered the single revelation most responsible for ending Nixon's presidency, the fact that a secret White House taping system recorded presidential conversations.

As a constitutional and political battle erupted over "executive privilege," meaning the president's prerogatives, the economy sank deeper into "stagflation," combining economic stagnation with inflation. Americans' buying power eroded as millions lost their jobs. Nixon was surprisingly Keynesian, intervening to fix the economy, including imposing a wage and price freeze. But cumulative deficits caused by financing the Vietnam War and the Great Society's ambitious vision had weakened the dollar and depressed the economy.

The American economy also suffered when Arab countries imposed an oil embargo on the West after Israel repulsed a surprise attack during the October 1973 Yom Kippur War. This new awareness of an energy crisis and Arab oil power prompted the "Great Inflation" of the 1970s, shaking American confidence. As prices soared, the stock market drooped, sapping Nixon's power.

Amid the international crises of October 1973, Nixon's vice president, Spiro T. Agnew, resigned abruptly on October 10. As Maryland's governor, Agnew had taken bribes, unrelated to Watergate. Two days later, Nixon nominated the House of Representatives minority leader, Gerald R. Ford, to be vice president, under the provisions of Amendment XXV. Ford only needed Senate and House approval, making him the first vice president—and eventually the first president—never to face the national electorate before serving in the country's highest offices.

Meanwhile, the Watergate special prosecutor, Archibald Cox, demanded Nixon's tapes. Nixon refused, invoking executive privilege. On October 20, Nixon ordered Attorney Gen. Elliot Richardson to fire Cox. Richardson refused and resigned, as did Deputy Attorney Gen. William Ruckelshaus. Finally, during this "Saturday Night Massacre," the next in line, Robert Bork, became acting attorney general and fired Cox. The intense backlash against Nixon prompted him to proclaim a few weeks later: "People have got to know whether or not their President is a crook. Well, I'm not a crook."

Cox's replacement, Leon Jaworski, proved equally tenacious. On April 29, 1973, Nixon reluctantly released transcripts of 46 taped conversations that the special prosecutor and the House Judiciary Committee had subpoenaed. Americans were shocked to hear Richard Nixon, their advocate of law and order, scheming and cursing in the Oval Office, with vulgarities rendered in the transcripts, far too frequently, as "expletive deleted."

To Nixon's credit, even as his presidency unraveled, he kept scoring diplomatic triumphs. He signed arms limitations treaties with the Soviet Union. He and Kissinger, now secretary of state, brokered more Middle East deals, laying the groundwork for what became the Camp David Accords of 1978 between Israel and Egypt.
Nevertheless, by 1974, Nixon was doomed. On July 24, in United States v. Nixon, the Supreme Court unanimously ordered the president to submit more subpoenaed tapes. Investigators now found their “smoking gun”: Nixon and Haldeman conspiring to impede the investigation days after the Watergate break-in. The House Judiciary Committee adopted three articles of impeachment, and on August 9, 1974, Nixon became the first American president to resign from office.

One month later, on September 8, 1974, Pres. Gerald R. Ford pardoned Nixon. This surprising move outraged most Americans and undermined Ford's call to heal. Gradually, Richard Nixon returned to the public eye, becoming a foreign policy guru in the 1980s. But when he died, on April 22, 1994, most obituaries began by identifying him as the first president to resign in disgrace.

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The fall of Richard Nixon was the fault of Richard Nixon. His personality flaws destroyed his presidency, but his Watergate-induced resignation was not inevitable. Had Nixon never recorded the tapes—or had he destroyed them before they were subpoenaed—his presidency might have survived. Showing more wisdom as his political career ended than he had previously, Nixon bid staffers farewell, saying: "Never be petty; always remember others may hate you, but those who hate you don't win unless you hate them, and then you destroy yourself."

Richard Nixon profoundly affected late-twentieth-century American politics. He helped shape the Cold War, first in its early adversarial phrase, and then with détente. He helped integrate television into politics, showing how it could make or break a politician. Despite so many liberals' contempt for him, he worked big government approaches into the Republican playbook. But, with Watergate, he shattered many Americans' faith in their leaders. Thus, for better and worse, Americans still live in his shadow.

**Bibliography and Further Reading**

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