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On the Highest Mountain, In the Deepest Valley

The Leadership of Richard Nixon

By Mark Couturier

The resignation of President Richard Milhous Nixon on August 9, 1974, marked the nadir of a unique and often tumultuous career in public service. For nearly three decades, he had helped shape the political landscape of the United States in unforgettable ways. However, his own failings and misjudgments had finally forced his removal from the national arena, and it would take a titanic effort to get back into it.

This week marks anniversaries of Richard Nixon's 1959 "kitchen debate" with Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev his 1960 nomination for president, his 1969 announcement of the Nixon Doctrine, and Congress's 1974 vote to charge Nixon with articles of impeachment.

Born in Yorba Linda, California, on January 9, 1913, the second eldest of five male children, Nixon entered the world in the humble trappings that have long been the staple of American success stories. The future president's father, Frank Nixon, was a hot-tempered man while his mother, Hannah Nixon, displayed a charity and compassion that knew no bounds.[1] As a young boy, Nixon displayed a sharp intellect that would serve him well in politics and earn him the respect of friend and foe alike. From primary to law school, the future president received stellar marks and won nearly every student election he entered. Yet, despite his impressive academic credentials, Nixon was forced to decline a full scholarship to Harvard because his family could not afford the train fare. Instead he attended Whittier College, where he helped found a predominantly working-class fraternity named the Orthogonian Society.[2] Upon graduation, Nixon went to the prestigious Duke University Law School, where his serious demeanor and monastic lifestyle earned him the irreverent moniker "Gloomy Gus." It was at Duke that the future president received his first taste of political intrigue. Anxious to learn how he had performed on the final exams during his second year, Nixon -- along with a few of his classmates -- broke into the office of the school dean in order to see his grades. Fortunately for the transgressors, the deed went unnoticed.[3] Nixon, however, would not be so lucky in regard to a similar action in the future.

After receiving his law degree, the future president joined millions of his countrymen in a tremendous struggle to gain employment in the midst of the Great Depression. Nixon attempted to secure a job with several prominent law firms in New York as well as the FBI, but was unsuccessful in his endeavors. Discouraged, Nixon returned to Whittier and found work in a small law firm. In the summer of 1940, he married Patricia Ryan, whom he had been vigorously pursuing for the previous two years. A few years later, Nixon managed to obtain employment with the Office of Price Administration in the nation's capital, and he and his wife moved to Alexandria, Virginia. Though good at his work, Nixon soon tired of the federal bureaucracy and yearned for something new. Barely six months after he had joined the OPA -- and despite an exemption that his Quaker religion entitled him to -- Nixon decided to quit in order to join the U.S. Navy and shipped out to the South Pacific a year later. He spent his time in the service as a ground aviation officer and saw no combat. Nonetheless, the war proved to be a formative experience for Nixon, as it exposed him to a diverse range of people and taught him his first valuable lessons in diplomacy.[4]

Upon returning home from the war, Nixon set himself on the career path for which he had spent his entire life preparing for when he ran for Congress in 1946 as a Republican against popular incumbent Jerry Voorhis of the Twelfth District. Describing himself as a "practical liberal," the young Navy veteran won an upset victory by waging a ruthless and well-managed campaign against his opponent, assaulting Voorhis' record and slandering him as a "fellow traveler" of Communists. During his time in the House, the future president gained and notoriety for his pivotal role in exposing Alger Hiss -- a former advisor to Franklin D. Roosevelt -- as a Soviet spy. In 1950, Nixon made a successful run for the U.S. Senate against Congresswoman Helen Gahagan Douglas, wife of film actor Melvyn Douglas. During the campaign, Nixon treated Douglas to the same vicious attacks that had served him so well four years earlier. However, in contrast to the hapless Voorhis, Douglas -- whom Nixon contemptuously described as being "pink right down to her underwear" -- did not go down lightly. In response to the accusations that were leveled at her, the Congresswoman gave her vituperative opponent a nickname that he would never be able to shake off -- "Tricky Dick."[5] Indeed, by this time, Nixon's rancorous partisanship and often underhanded style had earned him the lasting enmity of many on the Left.

Nixon was barely two years into his Senate career when he was dubbed to be Dwight Eisenhower's running mate in the 1952 presidential election, a move that set him firmly on the fast track to the Oval Office. During the campaign, the young candidate displayed an ability to connect with the public via the new medium of television when he gave his famous "Checkers Speech" in response to a false report that he possessed a private slush fund comprised of financial donations. He proved to be one of the most active vice presidents in U.S. history, particularly in the area of foreign policy. Nixon easily won his party's nomination in 1960 but lost the general election to John F. Kennedy in a close race that remains disputed to this day. He ran again in the 1962 California gubernatorial election, but was dealt yet another defeat at the hands of incumbent governor Edmund G. "Pat" Brown. Despite holding a "last press conference" in which he excoriated the media's perceived treatment of him and vowed to leave the political arena for good, Nixon remained active in Republican Party politics while carefully biding his time. In 1968, he saw another opportunity to capture the White House and seized it. Running as the "law and order" candidate and promising to bring "peace with honor," Nixon managed to convince many Americans that he alone could restore harmony and confidence in a nation that was badly fractured as a result of racial turmoil, social upheaval, and the disastrous war in Vietnam. On November 5, he achieved his lifelong goal by narrowly beating Vice President Hubert Humphrey and becoming the thirty-seventh President of the United States.[6]

Strengths in Leadership

In assessing the legacy and leadership of Richard Nixon, it is essential that one observe his career in its totality. Nixon's shortcomings as a chief executive have been amply documented over the years -- the paranoia, the likeability deficit, the dysfunctional nature of his administration. Indeed, the Watergate Scandal alone has produced enough books to fill a black hole. However, the president was also responsible for key policies that have had a profound effect on American government and foreign policy. It is also important to remember that there was much about Nixon's character that is worthy of praise. Like many of his heroes, he possessed the important traits of leadership to one degree or another -- ambition, vision, experience, communication skills, courage, and luck. Regardless of one's opinion of the man, it is clear that Nixon's presidency reveals a fascinating saga of Shakespearean proportions.[7]

Aside from being one of America's most controversial presidents, the record reveal Richard Nixon to be an enigmatic person whose contradictions and inconsistencies could confound the ancient Greek tragedians. He is roundly despised by many, yet remains the only American politician to be twice elected to both the presidency and vice presidency. Although a deeply polarizing figure, Nixon himself was no ideologue, a fact that is evident in his pursuit of many middle-of-the-road policies. Indeed, despite being a longtime favorite target of the Left, his presidency is often acknowledged by some historians as one of the most progressive of the Cold War Era. Noted for his personal awkwardness and apparent lack of charisma, Nixon was still able to convince the American people to join his crusade in the 1972 campaign and give him one of the biggest electoral landslides in U.S. history.[8] These inconsistencies and contradictions in Nixon's life and character could go on and on. The point here is not to enumerate them, but, rather, to attempt to shed some light on the complex and shadowy nature of a man who could sink to the lowest depths of personal and political degradation and -- at the same time -- soar to Olympian heights.

This essay will discuss the aforementioned characteristics of Nixon's leadership with the aim of bringing his presidency into sharper focus and facilitating a better understanding of his actions as chief executive. The essay will also delve into his main character flaws and the crucial role that they played in his downfall.

Interior Drive

Nixon's life is a case study of a boundless ambition. One has only to look at his career for evidence. Nixon's early years were marked by economic desperation and personal tragedy (two of his brothers died from tubercular diseases). Also, he was a socially awkward person who often felt uncomfortable and insecure around his peers. Yet, despite these handicaps -- or perhaps because of them -- Nixon effectively channeled his energies and used sheer force of will to propel himself from the dusty roads of Whittier to the narrow entrance of the White House. In a rare moment of thoughtful introspection, the president once remarked that, "What starts the process really are laughs and slights and snubs

when you are a kid. But if you are reasonably intelligent and if your anger is deep enough and strong enough, you learn that you can change those attitudes by excellence, personal gut performance, while those who have everything are sitting on their fat butts."[9] Nixon seems to have lived by these words, for his sense of determination and personal stamina were astounding by any measure. For instance, at one point while attending Duke Law School, Nixon lived and studied in a small toolshed in order to make ends meet.[10] It is also remarkable that he sought the presidency and actually won two elections after losing a previous one as well as a gubernatorial race. Even after he was driven from the presidency in disgrace, Nixon labored tirelessly to piece together his shattered image and build a reputation as an elder statesmen by penning numerous books and giving advice on important policy matters to succeeding presidents.

Sense of Mission

The backbone of Nixon's interior drive proved to be his vision of where he wanted to lead the country and how he wished to shape its relations with the rest of the world. On the domestic front, he sought to redirect the New Deal and the Great Society. Soon after taking office in 1969, Nixon initiated a sweeping program he termed "the New Federalism." This entailed a radical shift of revenue from Washington to state and local governments in an attempt to trim the fat of the federal bureaucracy and make the welfare system more efficient. Although Watergate severely hampered Nixon's ability to expand upon the concept of revenue-sharing, the idea was popular among the American public and led to significant budget reforms such as the State and Local and Local Fiscal Assistance Act, which, according to author Melvin Small, "established a federal program for matching state and federal funds involving $16 billion dollars over the administration's next three budgets." When the program had run its course in the mid-1980s, state and local governments had received nearly one hundred billion dollars from Washington.[11]

Another Nixon scheme on the domestic front was the "New American Revolution" -- a grand design for the revamping of the federal government. After winning a hard-earned victory in the 1972 election, the president unveiled this plan to his cabinet before shocking them all by demanding their resignations. Although poorly conceived, this unusual move represented a sincere effort on Nixon's part to achieve his cherished goal of reducing and consolidating the Washington bureaucracy and eliminating anyone who was not deemed to be absolutely necessary to the running of the country. Unfortunately for Nixon, he soon found it impossible to implement his "revolution" as Watergate began to swallow up his time and political capital -- and eventually the president himself.[12]

In the area of geopolitics, Nixon's visionary outlook on global matters led to the first major breakthroughs of the Cold War. Always one for drama on a grand scale, the president came into office with the intention of shocking the entire world by taking advantage of the Sino-Soviet split and reaching out to both sides in a bold move aimed at reducing tensions among the great powers. While Ronald Reagan is often credited for ending the decades-long state of hostility between the United States and the Soviet Union, it was Nixon who began the thawing process. His policy of détente resulted in the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT I) -- the first of its kind to be signed by the two superpowers. The successful conclusion of this agreement led to other groundbreaking deals that gradually reduced tensions between the two superpowers, such as the Anti-ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty (1972), SALT II (1979), and the Strategic Arms Reductions Treaties (1991 and 1993).

Even more impressive were Nixon's efforts to bring about a rapprochement between the U.S. and the People's Republic of China. The president's decision to grant diplomatic recognition to the regime of Mao Zedong came as a shock to people around the world -- not least because of Nixon's well-earned reputation as an anticommunist crusader. These overtures to the Soviets and the Chinese were bold moves on the global chessboard that brought the Free World and Communist Bloc closer together and lessened the possibility of open conflict for both of them.[13]

As president, Nixon also proved himself to be a leader who wasted no time in dealing with critical issues that confronted the nation. When the U.S. economy began to take an alarming nosedive in the early 1970s, the president introduced his "New Economic Policy," which included a temporary freeze on profit margins, wages, and prices, reintroducing the investment tax credit, and initiating spending cuts. Nixon also took America off the gold standard and attempted to stimulate an increase in automobile sales by doing away with an excise tax. While these policies -- which were more characteristic of a Democratic administration than a Republican one -- often produced dismal results, they demonstrate Nixon's pragmatism and willingness to try any possible solution to resolve a national problem.[14]

Probably the most remarkable -- and least appreciated -- example of Nixon's no-nonsense approach to getting the job done is his successful effort to desegregate the public school system in the South. Although he was a lifelong liberal on civil rights and, as president, pursued progressive policies such as affirmative action, Nixon was a staunch opponent of court-ordered busing and managed to capture a sizable number of George Wallace's supporters in the 1968 election by running on that issue as part of his infamous "southern strategy." This strategy was an ultimately successful effort on the part of the Nixon campaign to woo millions of traditionally Democratic White Southern voters over to the GOP by openly appealing to their vehement opposition to civil rights for African-Americans. However, once Nixon was elected to the presidency, he acted swiftly to end the foot-dragging of previous Democratic Justice Departments and enforce the decision of the Supreme Court after entering the presidency, despite his personal beliefs on the matter. As Nixon himself noted in his memoirs, "In 1968, some 68 percent of African-American children in the South attended all-black schools; by 1974, only 8 percent did."[15] Not even his predecessor Lyndon Johnson -- the godfather of several groundbreaking civil rights acts -- could bring about this result.

Skill-set

Although he suffered from a notable deficit of administrative experience upon entering the Oval Office, Nixon was undoubtedly one of the most skillful presidents that this nation has ever had. The man's intellectual brilliance has long been acknowledged by people from both sides of the ideological spectrum, and his political instincts were often second to none. Nixon came to the presidency with an impressive resume that included two terms in the House of Representatives, two years in the Senate, and eight years in the vice presidency. It should also be noted here that Nixon's time in the wilderness between his defeat in the California gubernatorial election of 1962 and his victory in the presidential election of 1968 provided him with an invaluable opportunity to enhance himself intellectually and cultivate a personal vision for his country and the world that would later serve him well when he stepped once more into the political arena to claim his place in history. As David Gergen puts it, "His banishment from politics was one of the best things that ever happened to him. It prepared him to lead."[16]

Nowhere were Nixon's boundless knowledge and intuition more evident than in matters of foreign policy. Nixon's rapprochement with the Soviet Union as well as his move to normalize relations with China represented major diplomatic coups that effectively achieved his goals of widening the Sino-Soviet rift and exploiting it to America's advantage. While this "triangular diplomacy" carried grave risks, Nixon accurately predicted that both the Soviets and the Chinese were prepared to do anything to avert a potential alliance between the U.S. and either one of them.[17] This allowed the president manipulate both sides and begin a process that would eventually lead to the introduction of free markets in China and the collapse of the Soviet Union.

A final leadership skill to consider is the ability to recognize talent and use it effectively. Many of the men and women that Nixon recruited for his team later became key figures in the administrations of Gerald Ford, Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush -- himself a Nixon appointee -- and George W. Bush. The list is a veritable Who's Who of American government: Henry Kissinger, George Schultz, Casper Weinberger, Patrick Buchanan, Donald Rumsfeld, Colin Powell, Frank Carlucci, James Baker, Ann McLaughlin, Dick Cheney, William Simon, Lawrence Eagleburger, James Schlesinger, Alan Greenspan, Paul Volcker, Alexander Haig, and William Rehnquist.[18] All of these people would go on to wield considerable influence on domestic affairs and play famous -- and infamous -- roles in foreign policy ventures that would shape the world in the latter stages of the Cold War as well as the post-Cold War era.

Ability to Communicate

Although Nixon could come across as an incredibly bright and articulate person to those who worked closely with him, he often presented an image to the public of an aloof and suspicious figure. Despite his political prowess, Nixon was not noted for his ability to capture the hearts of the people. Much of this had to do with his natural shyness as well as an apparent difficulty in grasping the complex dynamics of personal interactions. Being a good communicator has as much to do with how a person *acts* as it does with what he *says*. For instance, while Ronald Reagan and Franklin D. Roosevelt were effective speakers, their ability to connect with the American electorate was largely rooted in magnetic personalities that exuded geniality, optimism, and sincerity. Unfortunately for Nixon, he suffered a grievous lack of charm and charisma, which

helped to prevent him from becoming the beloved figure that he so desperately wished to be. Physically, Nixon was not a particularly handsome man, and his uncomfortable nature and infamous "five o'clock shadow" made him seem unappealing to many people in the age of television.[19] However, there were notable exceptions, such as Nixon's deft performance during the Checkers Speech in the 1952 presidential campaign.

It is interesting that Nixon's political career was fatefully intertwined with that of John F. Kennedy -- the very man he despised most and yet emulated every chance he got. During the first-ever televised debate in the 1960 presidential election, millions of Americans caught a glimpse of the two candidates. In JFK, they saw a fresh, healthy-looking Adonis in a tailored suit and sporting a youthful grin. In sharp contrast, Nixon appeared ill -- he had recently recovered from a serious knee injury -- and uneasy in his surroundings. In reality, Kennedy was the sick one; the man suffered from all manner of afflictions, including urinary infection, chronic colitis, Addison's disease, various venereal diseases, and gastrointestinal problems. In order to sustain himself, he was required to keep his body constantly pumped up with an assortment of drugs, courtesy of "Dr. Feelgood" (New York physician Max Jacobsen, whose medical license was revoked in the mid-1970s).[20]

Interestingly, those who heard the debate on the radio believed that Nixon had won due to his expertise and experience on the issues of government, and Kennedy's apparent lack thereof. However, those who watched the debate on television declared Kennedy the winner -- after all, he looked like one. The Massachusetts senator also had little difficulty convincing many working-class Americans into thinking that he was "one of them," despite his luxurious upbringing. Undoubtedly, this deceptive image allowed JFK to eke out a narrow margin of victory over his rival in one of the closets presidential races ever.[21]

Since his defeat in 1960 election, Nixon made several attempts to copy Kennedy's mannerisms and oratory, with dismal results. For example, he once staged a photo-op in which he was seen taking a leisurely stroll on the beach in an apparent effort to evoke a Kennedy-esque moment. However, this publicity stunt backfired as soon as people noticed that the president was wearing shoes while walking in the sand, a most *un*Kennedy-like thing to do. In his second inaugural speech, which he gave on January 20, 1973, Nixon made an utterly shameless -- and ultimately lame -- attempt to mimic JFK's immortal "Ask not what your country can do for you" line when he intoned, "In the challenges we face together, let each of us ask -- not just how can government help, but how can I help?"[22]

Yet it must be remembered that Nixon *did* win two elections -- including an historic landslide -- and came within a hair of claiming victory in a third. How did he do this? How was he able to win over millions of Americans, given his personal disadvantages? The answer is simple, yet tragic. When one takes a close look at Nixon's political career, it becomes manifestly clear that the man achieved many of his electoral triumphs by articulating not what he was *for* so much as what he was *against*. Nixon was a master at tapping into people's angers and fears and using it to his advantage. In his campaigns for the House of Representatives and the Senate, he exploited the Red Scare of the early postwar years by branding his opponents as communist sympathizers. In the elections of 1968 and 1972, Nixon captured the votes of the "Silent Majority" of Americans by railing against their perceived enemies -- liberal journalists, antiwar demonstrators, members of the counterculture, and racial integrationists.[23] Whereas Reagan, FDR, and JFK achieved their electoral success by bringing different groups of people together, Nixon achieved his by setting them apart. Given his personal weaknesses and lack of charisma, it is likely that he saw this kind of polarization as the most effective way of connecting with voters.

Courage

All good leaders possess an extraordinary amount of personal courage, and Nixon was certainly no exception. People who worked closely with him have recalled that the president displayed a sense of toughness throughout his two terms in office that was truly amazing to behold. A good part of Nixon's iron will was rooted in his interior drive -- his determination to make his mark on the world come hell or high water. His comeback in 1968 is a perfect example of this. Most politicians would have conceded defeat and drifted into anonymity after losing a presidential race *and* a gubernatorial race in the space of just two years, but Nixon licked his wounds and jumped back into the ring with a vengeance after a six-year hiatus. Even after he was forced from office because of a scandal that brought great shame and humiliation upon him and his family, Nixon refused to slink away from the public eye and spend rest of his life in a hole in the ground. Instead he devoted all of his time and energy to rebuilding his image and inserting himself once again into the world of policymaking.[24]

One particular story from the 1952 presidential election demonstrates Nixon's steel resolve. During the "Checkers" incident, Nixon found himself under enormous pressure from party stalwarts to drop out of the ticket for the good of the campaign. Instead of bowing to the pressure -- as many people in his position would most surely have done -- Nixon decided to make his case to the American public in a televised address. Throughout the whole fiasco, Eisenhower maintained an equivocal posture by refusing to either support Nixon or dump him; naturally this only served to increase his running mate's sense of isolation. Indeed, Nixon became so frustrated at Eisenhower's indecisiveness that at one point he screamed, "There comes a time in matters like these when you have to shit or get off the pot!" When Nixon appeared before the nation on live television, he gave his famous Checkers Speech in which he disclosed his personal finances and urged viewers to send their votes of endorsement or rejection to the headquarters of the Republican National Committee. The address was a publicity coup. Within hours after the broadcast, the RNC was flooded with letters and telegrams requesting that Nixon be kept on the ticket. This successful ploy demonstrated his ability to fight against seemingly insurmountable odds and win.[25]

The anecdotes of Nixon's courage and strength of will could fill a tome. His daring policies toward the Soviet Union and China indicated a willingness to go against his conservative, anticommunist base in order to further the national interest. This approach to foreign relations shows that despite Nixon's past rhetoric regarding America's Cold War adversaries, he could make the crucial distinction between *acting* tough and *being* tough. Also worthy of mention was his admirable refusal to challenge the results of the 1960 election, despite mounting evidence of blatant voter fraud in several key states. Like any good public servant, Nixon knew that a lengthy recount could have jeopardized the security of the U.S at a critical time and was able to put his country ahead of his own personal ambitions.[26]

Luck

Although he suffered many hardships throughout his life and political career, Nixon was aided by no small amount of luck as he pursued his goals. For instance, it was his good fortune that a group of Republican businessmen asked him to run in the 1946 Congressional election when he returned home from the war. Also, he was extremely lucky to be tapped as Eisenhower's vice presidential running mate in the 1952 election at the young age of thirty-nine, and from a field of more experienced candidates.[27] One of Nixon's strengths was his ability notice fortuitous opportunities that others might overlook -- such as the Sino-Soviet split and the fracturing of the Democratic Party -- and seize upon them in order to benefit his career as well as the national interest.

Weakness in Leadership

Although Nixon possessed many strong leadership traits, he also had his weaknesses, several of which proved to be self-destructive. Of course, any analysis of Nixon's flaws as a leader must inevitably center on Watergate, as it is key to his downfall. The point here is not to recount the details of the scandal; that has been done *ad nauseam* by many scholars. It is important, however, to discuss Nixon's shortcomings as a chief executive and how they created a situation where such a bizarre incident could occur and trigger a chain of events that eventually destroyed an administration. The origins of Nixon's demise can be traced to the dark recesses of his quirky nature. While the president's success in overcoming formidable barriers throughout his life is astounding to say the least, it left a smoldering residue of hatred and resentment that manifested itself in ugly ways during his time in the Oval Office. After all, Nixon had had to endure all manner of setbacks and humiliations as he climbed up the mountaintop to the presidency. While his working-class background encouraged him to try harder than many of his peers, it also left him with a pervading feeling that he did not deserve to be accorded any high status, despite his accomplishments. Also, Nixon's difficulty with interpersonal relationships added to this sense of insecurity, which -- combined with his bitterness -- made for a precarious situation. No doubt, these elements contributed to his belief that one had to be prepared to resort to ruthlessness in order to get ahead in politics.[28] While this notion has some basis in fact -- as some of Nixon's more successful predecessors had often employed questionable tactics -- his particular nature and dysfunctional management style guaranteed that such an approach to government would be carried to the utmost extreme. For instance, when Nixon entered the presidency, he displayed an "us versus them" attitude, which soon spread like wildfire throughout the White House. This narrow outlook was rooted in Nixon's belief that whole categories of people -- such as intellectuals, antiwar demonstrators,

Democrats, and the media -- were trying to bring him down, thus making it imperative that he crush them by any means necessary. While the president certainly had many enemies -- mainly on the Left -- he tended to inflate this perceived threat to the point of absurdity. He demanded total loyalty from his cabinet and limited his trust to a small coterie of individuals such as Bob Haldeman, John Erlichman, and Chuck Colson. Also, it did not help that some of these people would often use their privileged status in the White House to encourage Nixon's worst demons.[29]

The bizarre and bitter mindset of the president was exposed to the world when former White House Counsel John Dean testified to the Ervin Committee that the Nixon Administration kept an "enemies list" that contained the names several hundred political opponents who were to be singled out for harassment by federal agencies.[30] This revelation shocked millions of Americans and offered them a glimpse of the depths of Nixon's paranoia -- the kind of paranoia that led to the break-in of the Democratic National Committee headquarters at the Watergate Hotel.

Even when the scandal had grown to the point where it posed a grave threat to his presidency, Nixon refused to admit his mistakes and issue a mea culpa. Said his successor, Gerald Ford, "Most of us have hidden flaws . . . in Nixon's case, that flaw was pride."[31] Indeed, Nixon's stubbornness in this matter reveals the negative side of his courage. The president fervently believed that every crisis was a temporary situation that could be resolved provided one had the personal stamina needed to weather the storm. To admit any mistakes or wrongdoing was to choose the "easy way," which -- as Nixon saw it -- was the way of the weak. Unfortunately, he applied this thinking to the Watergate Scandal, and in the end his fortitude only served to hasten his inevitable downfall and delay his recovery.[32]

It must be noted here that Nixon's excesses destroyed not only himself, but many of those who worked faithfully for him. This is especially true in the case of some of the younger employees of the Administration like Donald Segretti, Jeb Magruder, Dwight Chapin, and Bud Krogh -- bright, idealistic individuals who came to the White House with good intentions and genuine enthusiasm. It was egregious for Nixon to exploit the ambitions of these men by creating a Gestapo-like environment that led them to believe that committing unconscionable actions was a natural part of being in government and necessary to get ahead. Although everyone ultimately bears responsibility for their own actions, it is almost certain that these younger employees would never have gone down this path had they worked for an administration that placed ethical considerations above a crass desire to maintain power. In the end, many of them paid for Nixon's insecurities and spitefulness with jail sentences and ruined careers.[33]

Final Assessment

Historian Joan Hoff once observed that, "Nixon was so much more than Watergate, and Watergate so much more than Nixon that his diehard critics can only simplistically conflate them."[34] Hopefully, Americans will get a better picture of his presidency as the tapes from his infamous recording system continue to be processed by the National Archives. Unfortunately for Nixon, those tapes that *have* been released do not paint a rosy portrait of the man. Many of them are littered with sordid conversations that only serve to offer up more evidence of his malevolence and flagrant disregard for the rule of law. However, in recent years there has been a reassessment of sorts on the part of some scholars, including former critics of the president. Although acknowledging his fatal flaws, they have also lauded his accomplishments in the international arena as well as his progressive reforms at home. Nevertheless, Nixon remains one of the most unpopular chief executives in recent memory. In professional and public surveys of former U.S. presidents, he is usually ranked near the bottom. While there is certainly a sound basis for this appraisal, it obscures the larger picture of his leadership and what it meant for the American people. The policies that he implemented as president continue to reverberate across the nation as well as the world at large.

Speaking at Nixon's Funeral in 1994, former senator Robert Dole sounded a prophetic note when he intoned that "The second half of the 20th Century will be known as the age of Nixon."[35] While his triumphs do not in any way erase the sins he committed while in office, they do add a fascinating dimension to a man who could instinctively grasp the complex dynamics of politics while failing to understand the logic of simple human interaction. In the end, Nixon's life stood for a grand and noble purpose. And while he failed to fulfill that purpose, the normally downbeat president revealed an ability to recognize potential fortune in all of fate's twists and turns when he remarked in his farewell address that "greatness comes not when things go always good for you, but the greatness comes when you are really tested, when you take some knocks, some disappointments, when sadness comes; because only if you've been in the deepest valley can you ever know how magnificent it is to be on the highest mountain."[36]

In the final analysis, it can truly be said that the life of Richard Nixon is a story of two individuals. Yes, it is the story of a vindictive and petty man who created legions of enemies with his vituperativeness, manipulated people and situations for his own benefit, and ultimately destroyed himself via a series of disasters that were wholly of his own making. But it is also the story of a bright young boy from a dusty town in California. He grew up in unenviable circumstances and spent his days slaving away in his father's small grocery store so that the family could make ends meet. But at night, while resting in his bed, the weary boy would listen attentively to the train whistle in the distance and dare to dream.

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[1] Stephen E. Ambrose, *Nixon*, vol. 1*, Nixon: The Education of a Politician, 1913-1962* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), 17.

[2] Christopher Matthews, *Kennedy & Nixon: The Rivalry That Shaped Postwar America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 24.

[3] Melvin Small, *The Presidency of Richard Nixon* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1999), 5.

[4] Ambrose, *Nixon*, vol. 1, 103-106.

[5] Matthews, *Kennedy & Nixon*, 72.

[6] Stephen E. Ambrose, *Nixon*, vol. 2*, Nixon: The Triumph of a Politician, 1962-1972* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989), 220.

[7] Gleaves Whitney, *Effective Leadership*, http://www.gvsu.edu/hauenstein/index.cfm?id=3CA4D2B8-B7F3-FE73-DA09178A96411BD2.

[8] David Gergen, *Eyewitness to Power: The Essence of Leadership: Nixon to Clinton* (New York: Touchstone, 2000), 21.

[9] William Doyle, *Inside the Oval Office: The White House Tapes from FDR to Clinton* (New York: Kodansha America, Inc., 1999), 172-173.

[10] Ambrose, *Nixon*, vol. 1, 76.

[11] Small, *Richard Nixon*, 195.

[12] Stephen E. Ambrose, *Nixon*, vol. 3*, Nixon: Ruin and Recovery, 1972-1990* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991), 143.

[13] Gergen, *Eyewitness*, 57.

[14] Small, *Richard Nixon*, 209-214.

[15] Richard M. Nixon, *RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1978), 439.

[16] Gergen, *Eyewitness*, 36-37.

[17] Small, *Richard Nixon*, 119-120.

[18] Gergen, *Eyewitness*, 52.

[19] Ambrose, *Nixon*, vol. 1, 571.

[20] Doyle, *Oval Office*, 98.

[21] Ambrose, *Nixon*, vol. 1, 587.

[22] Speeches by Richard Nixon, "Second Inaugural Address,"

http://www.watergate.info/nixon/inaugural-speech-second.shtml.

[23] Small, *Richard Nixon*, 246.

[24] Ambrose, *Nixon*, vol. 3, 584.

[25] Gergen, *Eyewitness*, 39-40.

[26] Ambrose, *Nixon*, vol. 1, 606-607.

[27] Small, *Richard Nixon*, 14.

[28] Doyle, *Oval Office*, 173.

[29] Gergen, *Eyewitness*, 79.

[30] Ibid., 88.

[31] Doyle, *Oval Office*, 194.

[32] Ambrose, *Nixon*, vol. 3, 584.

[33] Gergen, *Eyewitness*, 93-94.

[34] Doyle, *Oval Office*, 194.

[35] Robert Dole, "Senator Bob Dole's Comments at Nixon's Funderal,"

http://www.watergate.info/nixon/funeral-dole-comments.shtml.

[36] Speeches by Richard Nixon, "Final Remarks to the White House Staff,"

http://www.watergate.info/nixon/74-08-09final-remarks.shtml.