On the Highest Mountain, In the Deepest Valley

Mark Couturier
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The Leadership of Richard Nixon

By Mark Couteurier

The resignation of President Richard Milhouse 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 was time to take a tiring effort to get back into it. 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. As a young boy, Nixon displayed a sharp intellect that would serve him well in politics and earn him the respect of friends and foes 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 Orthodox Society. 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.

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.

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 credentials. In 1948, Nixon was elected to the House of Representatives, 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 had received a Winston Churchill owned checkers set from his wealthy neighbor. Nixon's salesmanship of his personal integrity and his ability to speak directly to the public in a way that resonated with them earned him a comfortable margin of victory.

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In a rare moment of thoughtfulness, Nixon displayed a sharp intellect that would serve him well in politics and earn him the respect of friends and foes 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 Orthodox Society. 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.

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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 more to Nixon's character than his reputation for dishonesty and deception. 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.

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 long-time 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 go along with his campaign and give him one of the biggest electoral landslides in U.S. history. 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 tuberculosis 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 charmed his way to success starting from the dusty roads of California 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 point by point. For his sense of determination and personal stamina, 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 statesman 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 Fiscal Assistant, "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-edged 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 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, 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 and a new form of affirmative action, Nixon was a staunch opponent of integration, and he upheld Wallace's supports 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 brilliance 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 bastardization 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 establishment 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 Shultz, 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 ability to capture the hearts of the people. Much of this had to do with his natural shyness as well as 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


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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. 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 fatefuly 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).

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 closest presidential races ever.

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?”

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 anger 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, members of the counterculture, and racial integrationists. 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 was a perfect example of this. Most politicians would have conceded defeat after losing an election, but Nixon refused to let it ruin his life. In fact, he decided that he would make a comeback in 1968 and that he would do it with a vengeance.

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 -- and his family, Nixon refused to sink 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.

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 being

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 was just thirty-nine, and from a field of more experienced candidates. 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 was just thirty-nine, and from a field of more experienced candidates. At the age of thirty-nine, and from a field of more experienced candidates. At the age of thirty-nine, and from a field of more experienced candidates.

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 he destroyed 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 and political career, his fall from grace is the result of a single event: the Watergate scandal.

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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.

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. 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
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." Hopefully, Americans will get a better picture of his presidency as the tapes from his infamous
recordings 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
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." 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."  

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

Final Assessment


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


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