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Q & A

The Larger Meaning of Mr. Nixon's Presidency

President Nixon has at last brought us together. The country is now united in relief at the resignation of the leader who betrayed every value and every friend in a desperate effort to save his own skin.

But the ignoble manner of Mr. Nixon's departure should not blind us to the larger meaning of his presidency. It was of a piece, from first to last, and in its virtues as in its defects.

When Mr. Nixon took office back in 1969, American pretension far outran American capabilities. American forces, especially in Vietnam, were supposed to hold the balance against any change deemed favorable to either Russia or China. The American market, opened to the world by a lopsided exchange rate and a one-way commitment to buy gold, supported prosperity in Japan and Western Europe, and such hope for development as resided in the Third World.

In this country it was widely believed that prosperity without recession had arrived, and that inflation could be held in check by the device of an income policy. It was equally supposed that government action could make decisive and rapid improvements in the welfare of minority groups long subject to government discrimination. It was said that unless government paid off its down-and-out claimants, society itself would be disrupted.

Mr. Nixon's great achievement was to bring expectations more in line with reality. He engaged the Chinese Com-

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munists and brought them out of isolation. He then addressed himself to Moscow. By squeezing the Russians with the threat of a China deal, he was able to pull out of Vietnam on terms far more favorable than ever offered to previous regimes, or imagined by those of us who criticized his policy.

By the same means, he was able to start the most important barrier yet erected against the danger of nuclear war—the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty reached with Russia in 1972. Moreover, the loosening up of great power confrontation opened the way to the October war in the Mideast, and the settlement between Jews and Arabs which Dr. Kissinger is now putting together.

Finally, by unilaterally closing down the gold window in August 1971, Mr. Nixon set the stage for the dollar devaluations which have now evened out the terms of trade between this country and the rest of the world. The basis was thus laid for a new set of relations

between this country and the Europeans and Japanese.

Far less success attended Mr. Nixon's efforts at home. But during his term in office, everybody came to realize that inflation was an intractable problem. The danger that the battle against rising prices could tip into recession came dramatically home.

All of us learned that government programs do not suffice to amend the social ills of centuries—and that there was a tight limit available on what was available for such programs. It was equally shown that violent protests by minority groups could be met and mastered by a tough stance—far better than by "understanding."

Had Mr. Nixon been able to articulate these achievements, had he been able to declare the virtue of sober realism and falling expectations, he might have come safely to the end of his term. But Mr. Nixon never saw himself as the leader of all the people. At all times he was in his own eyes the candidate of a minority. He played electoral politics, not presidential politics.

He strained at greatness.

So instead of an adjustment in foreign policy, he announced what clearly did not exist—a structure of peace. Instead of admitting the country had lost its way in domestic policy, he proclaimed a new prosperity and a New American Revolution.

Instead of reconciling doubters, and drawing to his side old foes, he salted the wounds. He and his men battered the media. They short-circuited the bureaucracy. They insulted the Congress and sabotaged Democrats. Those of us who dared to criticize were stigmatized as "enemies."

When trouble came in the form of Watergate, Mr. Nixon was without the human contacts which are the stuff of reality. Out of pride and sycophancy there was born a monstrous fraud. Contempt for others festered the belief that lies and tricks would work even as mounting evidence showed the truth would out. In the end, Mr. Nixon was alone, divorced from friends and reality in a psychic bunker of his own making.

His end was implicit in his beginning and his middle. At all stages, in its good parts and its bad, his presidency announces a single warning. It announces the danger of hubris. It proclaims anew the deathless message that those blinded by pride, and cut off from reality, rush headlong to their own doom.