
*Richard Milhous Nixon,
Whose Trust Was in
the 37th President,
Himself*

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By Haynes Johnson

PATHOS IS NOT ordinarily associated with the American presidency. Tragedy, majesty, loneliness, nobility, yes, but a pathetic quality of the presidency now seems uniquely Richard Milhous Nixon's own.

In those April days of 1973 when the President and his men were desperately wrestling with Watergate and finally, reluctantly, realizing that some form of public accounting had to be made, Mr. Nixon unburdened himself in the privacy of his office. He was speaking to his old friend and counselor, William P. (Bill) Rogers, then the Secretary of State but long before that a trusted companion in Nixon crises from other days. Although they were alone, the secret tape recorders that were to prove so destructive to the President captured an intimate glimpse of Richard Nixon in the throes of his final crisis and Richard Nixon still wanting to believe in his old dreams.

He had just spoken to Henry Petersen, the chief government prosecutor in the Watergate case, the President was saying. Then he said:

"Well, I'm not going to talk to him any more about that. After all, I'm the President of the country—and I'm going to get on with it and meet Italians and Germans and all these others. You know, really—"

"Oh, you do that," Rogers said consolingly. "I think you. I think that—"

The President interrupted. He had been living with Watergate for a long time now, spending at least half of his time on it, knew the immediate impact would be "terrible," knew it was a "mess," but he was confident that within a year it would all be seen in a better perspective.

"When it's finished—" Rogers began.

And the 37th President of the United States again interrupted to say: "I'll be here all along, Bill. The jury indicts, moves. We're going to get on with this country."

Richard Nixon never really was able to get on with the business of the country and the world. In the narrowest sense, he became a casualty of a third-rate, bungled burglary, but in a larger perspective he was a victim of himself. His ambitions, his insecurities, his aloofness, his resentments, his humorlessness, his inability to inspire popular confidence, his misplaced trust in others, his taste for the second-rate, his penchant for secrecy, for maneuver, for deviousness—these were the attributes that ultimately destroyed him.

In the end, they brought ruin to Richard Nixon, left a vast wreckage of shattered reputations, did incalculable damage to political, presidential and legislative institutions, and dealt a psychic blow to America's self-esteem.

And it was all so unnecessary.

WHEN HE WAS campaigning for President in 1968, Richard Nixon set out basic themes that he promised would characterize his administration. "The next President must unite America," he said. "He must calm its angers, ease its terrible frictions and bring its people together once again, in peace and mutual respect. He has to take hold of America before he can move it forward."

He spoke of articulating the nation's values, defining its goals, marshaling its will; of an administration of "open doors, open eyes and open minds"; of bringing dissenters into policy discussions, not freezing them out; of a government of scholars and thinkers drawn from the broadest possible base, not an administration of "yes men." But most important of all, he talked of a President who listens to the quiet, inner voices—voices that "speak from the heart and the conscience." These,

he said, are the voices that "carry the real meaning and the real message of America."

He came to office in a time of chaos and promised calm. He offered himself for leadership after a period of irrationality, of war and riots and assassinations, and pledged peace and reason and stability. Whatever Americans thought of Richard Nixon in the past—he knew he was not beloved as Roosevelt or Kennedy had been, and apparently never expected to be—they believed his promise and supported his aspirations.

Instead, the Nixon years proved to be at least as traumatic as the decade that had foreshadowed them. Crisis became the keynote of those years—the energy crisis, the economic crisis, the pollution crisis, the Mideast crisis, the Agnew crisis, the Watergate crisis.

Calm never came for very long to America. Confidence never was restored, and never was achieved. Instead, America lived through the Manson murders and the Mylai revelations, skyjackings and terroristic attacks, bombings and the Berrigans' trial, political kidnappings and conspiracy trials, Kent State and Jackson State, hardhats and campus "bums," Chappaquiddick and men on the moon, positive political polarization and the effete corps of rotten apples, Middle Americans and the Silent Majority, Carswell and Haynsworth, Woodstock and the counterculture, law-and-order and the Wallace shooting, "hooked" Vietnam veterans and moratorium demonstrations, the Pentagon Papers and the Calley trial, Women's Lib and Gay Lib, hard-core pornography and

X-rated films, radclibs and the media, inflation and devaluation of the dollar, the stock market slide and wage-price controls, political corruption and "laundered" money—and, toward the end, a President who was forced to proclaim, "I am not a crook."

There is irony—and tragedy—in all of this.

DESPITE THE TENSIONS that remained in the country and the new problems that arose, the President's public prescription for leadership was correct. Americans desperately did want to put aside the searing divisions of the 60s. They did want to "lower their voices." And, disturbing as the existing problems were, the President did offer hope for future tranquility. The cities were not scarred by race riots, the war was, in the cliché of the times, "winding down." Most hopeful yet was the prospect of real peace, genuine detente, true rapprochement. His initiatives toward China and the Soviet Union were universally acclaimed. Richard Nixon had in his grasp all he ever had dreamed.

The tragedy lies in Nixon himself. When America finally began to trust Richard Nixon, Richard Nixon found himself incapable of trusting America and its institutions.

With peace in his grasp and history waiting to vindicate him, the President saw a different country. The America he and his aides viewed from inside the White House was still in turmoil, still dangerous, still filled with enemies. They saw themselves as beleaguered and besieged. They took steps, secretly and in the name of "national security," to counter these perceived threats.

"In the spring and summer of 1970, another security problem reached critical proportions," the President told the public in May of 1973, in trying to explain why certain operations had been set in motion, among them Watergate. "In March a wave of bombings and explosions struck college campuses and cities. There were 400 bomb threats in one 24-hour period in New York City alone. Rioting and vio-

lence on college campuses reached a new peak after the Cambodian operation and the tragedies at Kent State and Jackson State. The 1969-70 school year brought nearly 1,800 campus demonstrations and nearly 250 cases of arson on campus. Many colleges closed. Gun battles between guerrilla-style groups and police were taking place. Some of the disruptive activities were receiving foreign support.

"Complicating the task of maintaining security was the fact that, in 1966, certain types of undercover FBI operations that had been conducted for many years had been suspended. This also had substantially impaired our ability to collect foreign intelligence information. At the same time, the relationships between the FBI and other intelligence agencies had been deteriorating. By May, 1970, FBI Director Hoover shut off his agency's liaison with the CIA altogether."

OUT OF THIS fearsome, conspiratorial portrait grew the darker side of the Nixon years. The President and his men put in motion the activities that led to their own disintegration:

Surveillance operations, bugging teams, surreptitious entries, "deep-sixing" of evidence, obstruction of justice, perjury, hush money, blackmail, enemies' lists, the secret bombing of Cambodia, the Pentagon spying on the White House, the White House spying on itself, \$100,000 in cash and Bebe Rebozo, San Clemente and tax write-offs, using the FBI, the CIA, the Justice Department for political purposes, ITT and the milk fund, fabricated polls, doctored documents, missing tapes, falsification of past presidential records, a cancer in the presidency, the transcripts, impeachment.

When he finally fell from power, Richard Nixon had failed to keep those promises of '68. His name will not be associated with political realignment, with taking the lead in building an emerging new Republican majority for the rest of the century, with setting a new—and higher—standard of government service. The legacy he has bequeathed is one of public cynicism and disbelief.

In these pages today The Washington Post examines those Nixon years and attempts a preliminary assessment of Mr. Nixon's impact on foreign affairs and domestic life, on politics and the presidency, on the moral and ethical climate of America and on hopes for reform and the restoring of confidence.

When it has all been said, though, two key questions intrude. They are about Richard Nixon, the man, and Richard Nixon, the politician, as perceived by the American people. Among his intimates, who really knew him or was able to unravel the enigmatic character of the private Nixon? And why, after so long an exposure to him publicly, were the American people surprised at how his presidency turned out?

The psycho-historians, now so much in vogue, are going to have a field day with the private personality of Richard Milhous Nixon, the boy from Whittier who became President. Some already have. They have examined his obsessive preoccupation with crisis and his need to prove himself. Already they have proclaimed him a paranoid.

WITH MR. NIXON, however, there is no need to indulge in amateur analysis or idle speculation. He has long been trying to tell us about himself. Our most introspective President figuratively scattered pieces of himself, his values and basic attitudes, over the American landscape for decades.

The self-portrait that emerges is of a driving, calculating, tense, grimly assured man who approached every task

and obstacle with fiercely single-minded determination. If there is any evidence of humor or sheer joy and exuberance, it has not come to the surface.

"It's important to live like a Spartan," he told an interviewer on the eve of his second inauguration. "That's not to say I don't enjoy a good time. But the worst thing you can do in this job is to relax, to let up. One must have physical and mental discipline here...."

Richard Nixon, quite obviously, always had an extraordinary amount of self-discipline and tenacity. It is, he has said again and again, the hallmark of his success, the reason why he was able to face and succeed in self-proclaimed personal crisis after personal crisis. His words themselves ring with a martial sound: It is the contest, the battle, the struggle that sustained him. "I believe in the battle, whether it's the battle of a campaign or the battle of this office, which is a continuing battle," he said in that same pre-inaugural interview. "It's always there wherever I go. I, perhaps, carry it more than others because that's my way."

In Caracas, in 1958, during one of those crises that helped shape his career, Richard Nixon displayed another telling aspect of his personal "battle" psychology.

"As we got into the car," he has written, "the rocks were flying around us, but I could not resist the temptation to get in one other good lick. I stood up on the rear seat as the car moved slowly away and asked [Secret Service Agent Jack] Sherwood to brace my legs so that I would not fall. I shouted, with [Vernon] Walters [later to be deputy CIA director during the Watergate episode] translating in rapid-fire Spanish, 'You are cowards, you are afraid of the truth! You are the worst kind of cowards.' I felt the excitement of battle as I spoke but I had full control of my temper as I lashed out at the mob. Those nearby who heard me quieted down, but the rocks from the rear continued to fly."

IN THAT MOST revealing book, "Six Crises," written after his defeat in the 1960 presidential election, Richard Nixon gave a general description of how crisis affected him—and how he had learned to handle it. "When a man has been through even a minor crisis, he learns not to worry when his muscles tense up, his breathing comes faster, his nerves tingle, his stomach churns, his temper becomes short, his nights are sleepless. He recognizes such symptoms as the natural and healthy signs that his system is keyed up for battle. Far from worrying when this happens, he should worry when it does not."

Years later, as he faced the denouement of his most serious crisis shortly after releasing his secret presidential transcripts, he again referred to those earlier struggles. Having profited from all those previous crises, he told columnist James J. Kilpatrick, he had been able to survive Watergate without "tingling nerves and a churning stomach." And, he remarked to Kilpatrick in a familiar Nixon personal reference, "I am a disciplined man."

As Washington Post staff writer Lou Cannon recounts in these pages today, his intimates over the years saw another Nixon—a man of shyness, gentleness, generosity. His own edited transcripts of his Watergate conversations offer an even more contradictory picture.

The Nixon who emerges from those critical discussions is neither the strong, decisive, commanding figure that he himself has described so often nor the magnanimous, compassionate figure known to his friends. In fact, if one didn't know what the letters iden-

tifying the speakers in those transcripts meant, it was often difficult to determine which man was the President of the United States. "H" (Halderman) comes over as stronger and far more decisive, "E" (Ehrlichman) as the shrewdest and craftiest, while "P" (President) is the vaguest, most confused and disorganized. Richard Nixon, in those moments, was hardly even master in his own house.

But however history finally judges the private Nixon—and that record is far from being written—the country has had to deal with a series of changing public perceptions of the man. To the end, even after all his years at the center stage of American public life, Richard Nixon still retained the capacity to surprise and bewilder friends and foes alike. Those who have proclaimed or denounced him have seen Nixon the conservative, Nixon the liberal, Nixon the centrist, Nixon the pragmatist, Nixon the peacemaker, Nixon the Cold Warrior, Nixon the old and Nixon the new.

Somewhere early in his career (the generally accepted time is during his 1950 race for the Senate), Richard

Nixon acquired the derisive description of "Tricky Dick." He never was able entirely to live it down, but as he climbed from senator to Vice President and finally to the presidency, he did gain a new measure of respect.

PART OF THIS was inevitable: Richard Nixon simply had been around longer than any major political figure in American history. The people came to believe they knew him, strengths, weaknesses and all. For a generation he stood at the center of political life. No other Republican basked so long in the national spotlight. In all of our history only Franklin Roosevelt had been on a national political ticket as many times, five. In time, he outlived his major political contemporaries—two Kennedys, Johnson, Stevenson, Eisenhower.

But part of his eventual presidential success sprung from a more complicated public view of him. It is too much to suggest that Mr. Nixon's old foes believed he had been transformed by the passage of years. Yet the people at large did see a different Nixon—a man who had changed, who had risen from defeat, who had tempered his harsher positions, who had become less strident, less accusatory, more accessible.

Thus his promise, thus his success.

Even so, his victory in 1968 was extraordinarily narrow. He had been defeated by one-tenth of a percentage point in his first try for the presidency in 1960. Eight years later he was elected by seven-tenths of a percentage point. And not since 1848 had a President been elected without having a majority of his party in control of either house of Congress.

Americans have always been indulgent toward their Presidents. Once elected, they are seldom subsequently defeated. Only seven times has an incumbent President trying for re-election been rejected: the two Adamses, Van Buren, Cleveland, Harrison, Taft and, the last time in this century, Hoover. Over the decades the power of the presidency continued to increase. Whatever else may have been troubling the country, the President stood alone. He held the one symbolic office above petty partisanship and ignobility. A President, until recently, had been taken at face value. He was believed, trusted.

Richard Nixon built on that reservoir of public good-will with more than words. In foreign affairs, with his trips to China and Russia, he helped ease

the tensions of the Cold War era. He presided over the final withdrawal of American ground forces from Vietnam, bringing to an end, for Americans at least, the longest, most divisive

war in their history. In domestic affairs, he appealed to the mythical "Middle Americans" who have felt most acutely the frustrations of rapid change and who believe they have been overlooked.

TO MANY CITIZENS, the President personified the problems of the ordinary American. Throughout his career he had evoked his own background of hardship, meager means, family tragedies and a determination to succeed against all odds. He also touched a responsive chord when he promised to bring into line the vast governmental bureaucracy and to return decision-making power to states and local communities. Like a majority of citizens, he stood strongly for law and order, for an end to permissiveness, for morality and decency.

There will always be a debate, of course, about whether a Democrat other than George McGovern would have fared better against Mr. Nixon in 1972. The strong probability is that no one could have beaten him. Certainly the President and his men did not need Watergate and its related activities to help them.

As it was, Watergate and corruption did figure largely in the '72 campaign. It never took hold, however, as a major issue. Never, it seems clear, because of two facts about most citizens: They tend to think of politics as vaguely corrupt anyway—and they refuse to believe their President could have anything to do with such a sordid business.

They refused to believe that Richard Nixon, whatever his stormy past, had not been redeemed by the majesty of the presidency. They refused to believe that a President who had struggled so long, had triumphed over adversity and defeat, had espoused such noble goals in such moral terms, could be party to such deceit and manipulation. They certainly refused to believe that he would view them privately with such cynicism and contempt.

"Nobody is a friend of ours," he said at one point in his taped conversations. "Let's face it! Don't worry about that sort of thing." And at another point, when he was wondering out loud

just how serious a crisis Watergate was, he said: "The point is, everything is a crisis. (Expletive deleted) it is a terrible, lousy thing—it will remain a crisis among the upper intellectual types, the soft heads, our own too—Republicans—and the Democrats and the rest. Average people won't think it is much of a crisis unless it affects them."

He never understood that he could trust those average people, just as they had finally trusted him.

RICHARD NIXON, who had been in politics so long and who had supposedly profited from so many critical battles, had made a massive miscalculation. As his transcripts show, he continued to believe that people weren't that troubled by Watergate. It would all blow over and be forgotten in time. He and his aides approached it as another problem to be manipulated rather than solved. A public relations blitz, a PR counterattack, would do the job.

By failing to act decisively, by attempting to conceal and thwart, by putting loyalty to aides above loyalty to the people, by treating a moral issue in an amoral way, his fate was sealed.

It was a pathetic ending for someone whose greatest ambition had been to

become an engineer on the Santa Fe Railroad and for whom the train whistle beckoning to faraway places and eventually to meetings with Germans and Italians and all those others who were "the sweetest music I ever heard"

"Crises may indeed be agony," Richard Nixon wrote nearly 14 years ago, "but it is the exquisite agony which a man might not want to experience again--yet would not for the world have missed."

Now he has taken himself through the ultimate "exquisite agony," and carried America and the world along with him. We will all be picking up the collective pieces for years to come.

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