

The Better Facet Of Richard Nixon

IN A FEW HUNDRED WORDS, the Constitution splits the Presidency into two parts, domestic and foreign.

For years to come historians will be arguing how it came about Richard Nixon was so bad in the first part, so perceptive in the second part. As we have been up to our necks in the first part for a year, what follows is a brief on the second part, but no solution to the puzzle.

In 1969, Mr. Nixon inherited a dismal mess in southeast Asia, a futile and tragic war supported by phony premises. With whatever motives, he apprehended the dooming case in Vietnam, and said he would end it. He had a game-plan, as the jargon goes. He faltered a couple of times, and he was roundly abused by those who thought it was a cinch to disengage half a million troops under fire in 30 days, but he was mule-headed, as Senator Goldwater said this week, and prevailed.



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BUT HE DID NOT ABANDON Asia to itself. Having truck with Communists was against his basic nature, but for years the Americans and Chinese had been exchanging insults over 12,000 miles of air. He perceived that as futile, too, and dangerous, and he seized the opportunity for rapprochement with one-quarter of the world's population.

He created a success in the potential in the China mission, and it derailed and alarmed China's enemies, the Russians. There was hardly a doubt Nixon had coordinated his global policies when Comrade Brezhnev visited him in the United States. The word detente was revived. It lacked the clarity and promise of the China move, but Nixon had accurately appraised the Russian problem.

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THE RUSSIAN PROBLEM was that the Russians were scared out of their boots by the Chinese to the east. They are scared the Americans would side with, and supply, the Chinese in an Asiatic war. But of course the Russians are also mule-headed.

Nixon had attached to himself a brilliant international negotiator in Henry Kissinger. Meanwhile, the Mideast had exploded again, and it was up Kissinger's alley. With Nixon's faith, he headed off a dangerous little war, and without Russian intervention. In six months he cooled it to its present simmering state. The Arabs ceased bad-mouthing us. Kissinger became a chum of Sadat of Egypt.

Politically, the international world is in the most sanguine state it has been in for more than a decade. It still has inflation, and sporadic manifestations of lingering hate, but it seems workable, where it had been notoriously unworkable in 1969.

The historical question is how Richard Nixon perceived the problem, and did something to alleviate it, while level-headed Presidents like Truman and Kennedy, fussed about it and did little on a global scale to alleviate it.

It is a conundrum, an unalloyed irony, and the historians will be digging in. But they are used to such puzzles. They haven't yet explained to us how Washington, a rich conservative, raised a revolt against the most mule-headed English Establishment of his century, and how Lincoln, a log-cabin boy, went to the White House and solved the worst of all American crises.

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