

Rise and Fall

Appraisal of Nixon Career

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By ROBERT B. SEMPLE Jr. AUG 9 1974

The central question is how a man who won so much could have lost so much. How could a public figure who so well perceived the instincts of the majority of his countrymen have misused the powers and duties those same countrymen so eagerly ceded him?

The historians will be kept busy on these questions, but for those who spent their time observing Mr. Nixon for the last six years the answer may well be found in a phrase he often applied to himself. "At bottom," he used to say, "I am a political man."

By his own description, he was a man of action rather than contemplation, a tactician rather than a theologian, a student of technique who seemed always impatient with substance, a figure whose exceptional antennae seemed to dwarf and even hide what lay at the core.

To his enemies, he was both manipulative and synthetic; to his friends, a pragmatist unencumbered by inflexible principles; to those who watched him, a man who learned to walk before he had learned to walk

and who, on reaching his destination, was not always certain what to do when he got there—except, perhaps, to keep going.

That image has only been reinforced and deepened by the transcripts of three conversations with H. R. Haldeman on June 23, 1972, six days after the Watergate break-in, which were released on Aug. 5, and the edited transcripts of White House conversations published April 30. Whatever history's judgment of those tapes, this much was clear: Faced with mounting evidence of deception and wrongdoing in his own official family, he sought not to confront the issue but to manipulate it until he himself became part of the deception.

Mr. Nixon used the words "I am a political man" proudly, as if to challenge the moralists, but in the end they became his epitaph—a possible explanation for both his success and failure.

For if the words implied the presence of a talent for finding opportunities for political prof-

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it, and for seizing the right issues at the right time, they implied the absence of any guiding commitment other than a burning dedication to victory in his chosen field.

Mr. Nixon might find such an assessment unfair or excessively narrow; but if the record of the recent past is anywhere near accurate, he appears to have lavished as much time on neutralizing or destroying his enemies as he did on winning friends, and in so doing he directly or indirectly sanctioned the activities that have now brought him down.

There is one other ingredient which, when added to his preoccupation with political skills, helps explain both his success and failure: a long and occasionally feverish political memory.

He was a man who had been profoundly wounded—by the slights of a President he once served, by the press, by political defeats—and though he surmounted them all, the wounds remained, unforgotten and unforgiven, especially those inflicted by men he regarded as intellectuals.

"I'll never win the intellectuals, even the press," he said bitterly during one long ride in a car during the New Hampshire primary of 1968, where he began his political comeback. They were his enemies, and he saw them as intractable.

Accordingly, it was not a difficult matter, later on, to identify himself with the fears and aspirations of the so-called silent majority—thus winning a massive political triumph in 1972;

or, by the same token, to take swift and covert retaliation against his enemies on the left when they seemed to threaten him on the issue of the war—thus insuring, as it turned out, his political demise in 1974.

Again the edited transcripts of the tapes are instructive. Mr. Nixon's world was dominated by dark enemies trying to "do us in." "This is war," he would tell John W. Dean 3d on Sept. 15. "They are after us." Or on March 13, again to Mr. Dean: "Nobody is a friend of ours. Let's face it!"

If one could set aside Watergate, Mr. Nixon's tactical shrewdness clearly served him well. He won the Presidency in 1968 not because he offered a better plan for ending the war, but because somebody else was in charge of that war; not because he offered new directions but because he adroitly identified himself with public complaints against crime, inflation, permissiveness, and violence.

It was perhaps a measure of his addiction to and success with that technique that he used it again when he confronted George McGovern four years later. Once more he offered not so much a program for the future as a carefully calculated set of responses to the country's grievances, adding to his earlier list of villains the integrationists, abortionists, and those who seemed to oppose "traditional American values."

"He reaps," wrote one observer after studying Mr. Nixon's campaign style, "without really having sown."

In between elections, he worked constantly to divine the

nation's temperament and let himself be guided by what he found. Sensing public weariness with Lyndon B. Johnson's aggressive preaching and massive programs, he lowered his voice and instructed his Cabinet aides to subordinate style to the business of serious management.

Sensing public dismay with the cost and size of the Great Society, he offered a domestic strategy that stressed—most notably in the redistribution of the functions of the antipoverty program and the espousal of revenue-sharing—the themes of consolidation and coordination, while at the same time keeping his opponents at bay with the proposals for welfare reform and the abolition of the draft.

His foreign policy seemed no less adroit. Reasoning that the public at large would not accept an open defeat in Southeast Asia, he kept up the pressure, using as primary weapons the airwaves at home and the air space above North Vietnam. But sensing also that America would not tolerate indefinite war, he answered that weariness by undertaking a measured withdrawal, and in the bargain made some surprising new friends among the Russians and Chinese.

Foreign policy aside, however, it was difficult in the beginning and even harder at the end to find a sustained philosophical basis in Mr. Nixon's approach to his Government and his people. When he quit Mr. Nixon's campaign in disgust in 1968, speech writer Richard Whalen—a confirmed conservative and Nixon supporter—was asked by a reporter to explain his defection.

"What does this man stand for?" he asked, before hanging up the phone.

The question persisted throughout the balance of the campaign, into the preinaugural planning process at the Pierre Hotel in New York, and beyond. Midway through the first Nixon term, for example, two White House speech writers tried—by submitting position papers—to construct an intelligent framework for the Administration's actions: their papers sounded quite different themes.

By mid-1972, mere confusion had become chaos as more and more initiatives were either sacrificed to or altered by perceived political realities. The President's dedication to the minimum income features of his welfare plan—never all that strong to begin with—disappeared altogether.

Revenue-sharing became, quite suddenly, a sure-fire device for easing property taxes. Judges who had been grudgingly applauded for ordering the end of Southern school desegregation found themselves the target of official abuse when they decreed similar remedies for the North.

The electoral mathematics of 1972 makes it hard to argue that Mr. Nixon's strategy was untimely. A chord was there and he touched it; he sensed the desire of vast numbers of white Americans simply to be left alone, and in so doing become

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their champion.

Yet neither his political nor personal triumphs — including his rapid escape into riches from the poverty of his boyhood and the cloth-coat comforts of his middle age — gave him enough confidence or professional serenity to deal head-on with his adversaries. Always, it

seemed, there remained one more threat to his authority to guard against, one more potential menace to his tenure in office to overcome, some new advantage to be gained or potential disadvantage to be avoided.

Reasoned debate or the mere assertion of belief was not, to Mr. Nixon, a sufficient response to such challenges, whether they came from the press, Congress, his own bureaucracy, or the critics of the war. The question asked in the inner councils of the White House when criticism arose—not just during the dismal days of Watergate but throughout the Administration—was not “how should we sell them on the rightness of our idea?” But rather “how do we deal with them?”

Thus the contrived campaign rallies and sanitized crowds of 1968, 1970 and 1972. Thus, too, the highly stylized relations with the press which, like Congress, was either ignored or lectured in elaborate “briefings,” or abused from afar by Vice President Agnew. Even Walter J. Hickel, the Secretary of the Interior who complained in writing of the White House’s insensitivity to youth, never got the courtesy of a reasoned Presidential response to his thoughts. One of Mr. Nixon’s aides dismissed him instead.

The protective apparatus that surrounded the President and that seemed to act without any serious demurrer from the Oval Office reserved its sternest tactics, however, for Mr. Nixon’s Democratic opponents and the critics of his policies in Vietnam.

While Mr. Nixon was busily promoting his own virtues to the voters in 1972, for instance, his operatives were quietly disrupting Senator Edmund S.

Muskie’s campaign or, less quietly, impugning Senator McGovern’s patriotism. A year earlier, while Mr. Nixon was assuming a position of lofty legal opposition to the publication of the Pentagon papers, his aides were busily burglarizing Dr. Daniel Ellsberg’s psychiatrist’s office in California.

The crucial and revealing aspect of all this is that the same assistants were often engaged simultaneously in the creation of a program suitable for presentation to Congress and the voters, and in covert schemes of counterinsurgency.

If various grand juries are correct, John D. Ehrlichman—whose official function was to advise the President on domestic alternatives—was also given responsibility for the undercover effort to discredit the left. It was this effort that gave such enormous impetus not only to the “plumbers” operation but to the whole game of political espionage that eventually brought Mr. Nixon’s edifice crashing down.

In Mr. Nixon’s mind, however, there was nothing inconsistent in this merging of roles, either by Mr. Ehrlichman or anyone else. He seemed always insecure about the size of his following, and maybe even about himself.

In such circumstances, opposition to his policies became challenges to himself, the respectability of his office, and his political future. Having thus exaggerated the menace, he counterattacked accordingly. It was all tragically unnecessary, and in the end it ruined him.

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President Nixon in the Oval Office of the White House



The New York Times/Mike Lien
President and Mrs. Nixon, Vice President and Mrs. Agnew at inauguration last year after a landslide victory. At left is Chief Justice Warren E. Burger.