Module 10: How Will Historians Treat Richard Nixon?

Context

1968: A Nation in Turmoil

When Richard Nixon became the thirty-seventh president of the United States, he assumed leadership of a country in turmoil. In 1968, the year of his election, Cold War tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union shaped American foreign policy, and Americans were at loggerheads over U.S. participation in the war in Vietnam. At home, the country was divided over the civil rights movement and how to fix racial segregation in schools. The economy, once strong, strained under government efforts to conduct war and support social welfare programs simultaneously. National television had broadcast the social and political protests by young people on college campuses, including footage of the police brutally breaking up demonstrations in the park near the convention center during the Democratic National Convention in Chicago. Lyndon Johnson, who had soundly defeated Republican archconservative Barry Goldwater in 1964, had decided not to run for re-election, having been forced to withdraw by bad publicity that focused, in particular, on the quagmire in Vietnam and Johnson's poor showings in the primaries. Eugene McCarthy and Robert Kennedy had emerged as serious challenges to Johnson's leadership, although Robert Kennedy's assassination — just months after the assassination of civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. — had resulted in the Democratic Party's nomination of Johnson's vice president, Hubert Humphrey, to head the party ticket. At the same time, Alabama Governor George Wallace led a third-party revolt that drew strength from southerners opposed to integration and northern blue-collar voters alienated by the scenes of radical protest and by Johnson's Great Society programs of social welfare benefits for minorities and the poor. In this political climate, the Republican Party turned to one of its stalwarts, a comeback kid from California who had been vice president in the Eisenhower administration.

The "Silent Majority"

Nixon had run for president and lost to John Kennedy in 1960. In 1962, after running for Governor of California and losing again, he planned to retire from public office. Not long after, however, he reversed his decision. Although he supported Barry Goldwater's campaign in 1964, Nixon laid out a more moderate Republicanism designed to appeal to the "forgotten American," a member of the "silent majority." Comprised ostensibly of patriotic middle-class and working-class

Americans, Nixon's silent majority found themselves at odds with the protesters in the streets and with the leaders of a Democratic Party that had once commanded their loyalty. Under Franklin Roosevelt during the 1930s, the Democrats had fashioned the New Deal network of social insurance and social welfare programs, labor legislation, and government spending to ameliorate the effects of the Great Depression. In doing so, the party had forged a strong coalition of northern minorities and workers and southern populists that kept the Democrats in control of Congress for much of the post-World War II period. The presidency, however, was a different story. Voters in the 1950s preferred the affable Republican, General Dwight D. Eisenhower, to the erudite Democrat, Adlai Stevenson. Democrats had reclaimed the White House for eight years after 1960, but Nixon and his allies saw an opportunity to draw voters to a Republican candidate for president in 1968, and Nixon won the election.

The Early Years

Richard Milhous Nixon was born in Yorba Linda, California, on January 9, 1913, the second of five sons. When he was nine, his family moved to Whittier, where he later attended the local Whittier College. Nixon excelled in both politics and debate at Whittier and earned a scholarship to attend Duke University Law School. He graduated third in a class of twenty-five in 1937. With law degree in hand, Nixon returned to Whittier to join the town's oldest law firm and became a partner in just two years. World War II intervened in Nixon's plans to join a bigger law firm. He served first in the Office of Price Administration in Washington, D.C., and then as a Navy lieutenant in the South Pacific. On returning to civilian life, California Republicans invited him to run in the state's 12th congressional district for a seat in the House of Representatives.

Tricky Dick on the Campaign Trail

Nixon's campaign tactics in 1946, which included smearing an opponent and denying all responsibility, foreshadowed tactics he would employ in later elections. While running against incumbent Jerry Voorhis, Nixon accused the well-known New Deal Democrat of accepting money from a communist-dominated political action committee. Known as "red-baiting," the tactic proved effective in the 1940s and 1950s as Cold War tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union taught the American public to fear both the communist menace abroad and communist infiltration in the federal government. Nixon leveraged public fear of communism in 1946 and again in 1950, when he ran for Senate and defeated the incumbent, Helen Gahagan Douglas. Nixon's effective use of questionable

campaign tactics earned him the sobriquet Tricky Dick, a tag he was unable to shake, even as president.

Nixon for Vice President

The young, energetic, vigorous campaign orator and senator from the second-largest state in the Union came with impeccable anti-communist credentials. Republicans selected Nixon to serve as Dwight D. Eisenhower's running mate in the 1952 presidential campaign. Before the election, however, Nixon was accused of accepting illegal campaign contributions for his personal use; in response to calls for his removal from the ticket, Nixon addressed the nation about his personal finances, presenting audit results that revealed a rather modest lifestyle. The self-effacing address, known as the Checkers Speech (a reference to the one gift Nixon admitted accepting, a cocker spaniel named Checkers given to him by his young daughters), may have been a humiliating experience for Nixon, but it diffused attacks on his suitability as Eisenhower's running mate. In November, the Eisenhower-Nixon ticket overwhelmed the Democrats and Richard Nixon became the second-youngest vice president in U.S. history.

Public and Private Personae

Over the next eight years, Nixon would prove to be the most active vice president to date, often traveling abroad to represent the administration and assuming responsibilities during Eisenhower's illnesses. His success as vice president led Republicans to nominate him for president in 1960. Richard Nixon, however, was a complex personality. In contrast to his public persona, Nixon the man was introspective and shy, a recluse who avoided contact with all but a few trusted advisers. The core characteristics of Nixon's political persona included anger and vindictiveness, a lack of sincerity, and a cynical approach to people's motives. Nixon's long list of enemies included prominent entertainers and the "Eastern Establishment" of liberal Democrats and Republicans with Ivy League pedigrees. Also well-documented is Nixon's anti-Semitism. Moreover, Nixon lied to defeat opponents and to maintain his reputation. According to Nixon biographer Iwan Morgan, Nixon "lied most vehemently to deny that he was lying," a trait clearly evidenced in Nixon's statements about the Watergate break-in. Another Nixon scholar, Joan Hoff, has argued that Nixon was not "unprincipled" (a person with no moral scruples), but rather "aprincipled" (a person who feels "no remorse for transgressions because there is no awareness of ethics"). Whatever his personality flaws, Nixon was committed to building a new Republican majority, enhancing executive authority, and establishing a new foreign policy that would allow the

world's three superpowers to work toward arms limitation and trade relationships. At once idealistic and adversarial, he seemed willing to do whatever it took to gain the power needed to enact his ideals. As Morgan has written, "no other major American politician of modern times has shown the same willingness to play dirty in pursuit of democracy's mandate."

The Vietnam War

The war in Vietnam dominated Nixon's first four years in office. When Nixon was sworn into office in January 1969, the United States had 530,000 troops in Vietnam. Although the majority of Americans supported the war, they also wanted U.S. involvement to wind down. The antiwar movement, a vocal minority led by students, activists, and pacifists, had taken their opposition to the streets, leading marches, demonstrations, and moratoriums to halt American involvement in Vietnam. In this atmosphere, Nixon hoped to end the war quickly, although is has become clear in retrospect that the new president and his advisors had no "secret plan" for doing so, contrary to what Nixon had promised during the campaign. Rather, the Republican administration continued to participate in peace talks with the North Vietnamese initiated by Lyndon Johnson. Nixon also promised to deploy no more troops to Vietnam and to follow a policy of "Vietnamization," or the provision of aid to the South Vietnamese government while turning responsibility for the war over to the South Vietnamese military to enable the withdrawal of American troops.

The Invasion of Cambodia

The peace talks dragged on for four years. In the meantime, the Nixon administration announced periodic troop withdrawals all the while initiating covert actions in Laos and Cambodia so as not to appear to be escalating the war. On April 30, 1970, however, Nixon told the nation of his decision to invade Cambodia in order to disrupt supply lines and force the North Vietnamese to compromise. The decision was met with angry protests in the United States. In the ensuing demonstrations on college campuses, National Guardsmen shot into a crowd of protesters on the Kent State University campus, killing four students and wounding fourteen others, and two students were killed and eleven others wounded in Mississippi on the campus of Jackson State University, a predominantly black school. Nixon's decision to invade Cambodia also gave voice to the "doves," members of the Democrat-controlled Congress who opposed involvement in Vietnam. The Senate voted to cut off funds for the Cambodian invasion (the House of Representatives did not concur) and repealed the 1964 Gulf

of Tonkin Resolution that had provided Johnson with support for escalation in Vietnam. In the long term, rather than preserving a pro-American regime, the U.S.-led invasion instead lent support to the Khmer Rouge, the Cambodian communist rebels. In 1975, after the United States had pulled out of Southeast Asia, the Khmer Rouge took control of the country and initiated a three-year blood bath in Cambodia, during which as much as 20 percent of the population died.

The End of the War

A final resolution to U.S. involvement in the Vietnam conflict was reached in January 1973. Between 1969 and 1973, 18,000 U.S. military personnel died in Vietnam, in addition to 107,000 South Vietnamese casualties and an estimated 500,000 communist deaths. The peace resolution permitted North Vietnamese military to remain in South Vietnam after U.S. troops withdrew, a proposition made by the North Vietnamese in 1969 but rejected by the Nixon negotiators for four years. During these same years, the Nixon administration ended the Selective Service System, which eliminated the military draft and established the all-volunteer army.

Nixon's Foreign Policy "Breakthroughs"

Ending the war in Vietnam comprised only one element of Nixon's foreign policy initiative. Nixon considered himself a foreign policy expert. Diplomacy interested the president much more than domestic issues; he once admitted that he had "always thought the country could run itself domestically without a president," but that international affairs needed executive direction. While president, Nixon signed an arms reduction agreement with the Soviet Union and visited Moscow as part of a policy known as détente, stunning Americans accustomed to over two decades of his Cold War anti-communist rhetoric in the process. He also reestablished diplomatic relations with Communist China in 1972 (they had been severed in 1949 when communist forces took control) and became the first president to visit that nation. According to the historian Melvin Small, "Only Nixon Could Have" became one of the "themes" of Nixon's foreign policy "breakthroughs." During the 1940s and 1950s, Nixon had established his anti-communist credentials; liberal Democrats, less impeccably anti-communist, could not have risked the compromises necessary for either diplomatic accomplishment. Equally important, Nixon believed that, had he compromised earlier on the Vietnam situation, he would not have been able to make such overtures or help deescalate the Cold War.

Nixon and Détente

Several key concepts underscored the president's foreign policy programs, including a revision of the cold warrior's commitment to the domino theory, or the idea that, if one nation in a region turned to communism, others would surely follow. Nixon also believed, as did many others, that communists operating in small nations throughout the world took direction from Moscow and that the Soviet Union could control their actions. Such a perspective helped shape Nixon's commitment to détente. On the one hand, he believed that better relations between the two nations would help with crisis management around the globe and would enable the United States to reduce military commitments in Asia. On the other hand, he assumed a Soviet willingness and capability to shape the actions of the North Vietnamese. Such a policy became known as "linkage," whereby the United States would make diplomatic concessions in areas such as arms reduction and trade agreements if the Soviets maintained control of their communist "puppets." Linkage proved quite unsuccessful as the Hanoi regime and others around the world acted independently of the desires of the Soviet leaders.

Triangulation With China and the Soviet Union

Despite his fervent anti-communism, Nixon was also a pragmatist, as was his principal foreign policy advisor, Henry Kissinger. Détente and arms reduction would help the American economy, and European nations, it soon became clear, were going to pursue détente regardless of the Nixon administration's position. Soviet leaders as well had their own reasons for seeking détente at this point; for one, the developing communist power in mainland China had replaced the United States as the Soviet Union's primary threat. Nixon leveraged the weakening of the once-unified communist front by developing a "triangulation policy" to deal with both China and the Soviet Union, suggesting that the United States would support China should the Soviets attack, while at the same time negotiating grain sales, disarmament treaties (Strategic Arms Limitation Talks, or SALT), and cultural exchanges. Triangulation worked less because of Nixon, however, and more because China feared closer Soviet ties with the United States and the Soviets feared a similar Chinese rapprochement.

The Beginning of the End of the Cold War

Nixon biographer Melvin Small claims that "détente with the Soviet Union might not have been possible had it not been for Nixon's even more audacious policy of opening relations with 'Red China.'" After secret negotiations between the two

nations, Nixon announced that he would visit China in February 1972. The Shanghai Communiqué, the result of the visit, stipulated that neither nation "seek hegemony in the Asia Pacific region" and that each oppose "efforts by any other country or group of countries to establish such hegemony," a statement clearly aimed at the Soviet Union. In retrospect, Nixon's engagement with China and the Soviet Union marked the beginning of the end of the Cold War. At the time, however, it failed to achieve key diplomatic objectives. Détente with the Soviet Union suffered under Nixon's successors; President Jimmy Carter in particular accused the Republicans of ignoring human rights issues and adopted a less cooperative strategy, as did Ronald Reagan early in his administration. Changes in the Soviet Union in the mid-1980s led to a renewal of détente. In China, hopes that American businesses would thrive in the huge China market went unfulfilled. Neither Nixon's visit nor the Shanghai Communiqué voided China's claim to the island of Taiwan, a position that the United States continued to reject.

Domestic Policy

If the Nixon administration inherited Johnson's Vietnam, it also inherited the domestic issues that had dominated LBJ's presidency. Given Nixon's penchant for foreign affairs, the Republican Party's disdain for federal regulation, and party opposition to the social welfare agenda of the New Deal and the Great Society, political pundits had reason to expect little from the Nixon administration. Surprisingly, however, the Nixon administration became, in the words of one Democrat, the "most progressive" administration of the post-war era. Nixon's apparent liberalism can be traced to his pragmatic approach to governance and his inherent distrust of ideology. Nixon called himself an American Disraeli, referring to Benjamin Disraeli, the nineteenth-century British conservative politician who sponsored social welfare legislation with the paternalistic goal of preventing social revolution from below and keeping the upper classes in control. In addition, Nixon's domestic agenda arose out of a determination to create and secure a new electoral majority for the Republican Party, which meant working with a Democrat-controlled Congress that wanted to continue the liberal agenda of the Johnson administration. Yet unlike the programs of other great progressive reformers — Roosevelt 's New Deal, Truman's Fair Deal, Johnson's Great Society —, Nixon's reforms lacked an overarching theme or even a formal name. Sometimes called the "New Federalism," Nixon's successful domestic initiatives included the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency, the ending of the Selective Service System, the extension of the vote to eighteen-year-olds and older, the reorganization of the postal system, the formation of the Occupational Health and

Safety Administration, the expansion of social security benefits for the disabled, and major increases in public support for the arts.

School Desegregation

Among the many issues that drew the administration's attention, three in particular stand out as representative of Nixon's first term: the furtherance of school desegregation, health and welfare proposals, and environmental protection policies. In 1969, fifteen years after the Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, sixty-eight percent of black children living in southern states attended all-black schools. By 1974, only eight percent did so. The historian Iwan Morgan claims that "Nixon desegregated Southern schools not because it was right but because he had no choice;" the Supreme Court had ruled in 1969 that schools had to be desegregated immediately. Nonetheless, once it became unavoidable, Nixon threw his political weight behind plans to integrate southern schools. In other areas related to civil rights, however, Nixon remained far less committed. When the Supreme Court ruled in 1971 that lower courts could order busing of pupils as a way to achieve integrated schools, Nixon threatened to seek a constitutional amendment against busing. He appointed no African Americans to his cabinet, nominated two racists to the Supreme Court (the Senate rejected both nominations), and peppered his private speech with racial slurs.

Health and Welfare Proposals

Nixon's plan to reform the welfare system proved far more daring than his civil rights program. The Family Assistance Plan (FAP) was designed to replace idiosyncratic state welfare programs created by the New Deal with a homogeneous federal plan that included guaranteed annual income to all Americans and social service supports for the working poor. Nixon, however, could not persuade Congress to pass the new legislation. A combination of conservative Republicans, who thought the legislation went to far, and liberal Democrats, who thought it did not go far enough, prevented its passage. FAP was the only substantial proposal for welfare reform to come out of the federal government until the 1996 welfare reform law passed under the Clinton administration. In contrast to his support for welfare reform, Nixon vetoed the Child Development Act of 1971, which would have provided free childcare to the poor. He based his decision partly on cost and partly, he claimed, on the belief that government support for childcare would "Sovietize" the American family.

Environmental Protection Policies

Finally, Nixon's support for environmental protection made his administration one of the "greenest" in American history. As was the case with many of his domestic policies, political considerations drove Nixon to address environmental issues, and his commitment to them was not deeply rooted. The administration hoped that moderate steps in an area popular with voters would preclude more radical environmental policies. Nonetheless, the Nixon administration was responsible for creating the Environmental Protection Agency, the federal agency formed to "protect human health and to safeguard the natural environment — air, water, and land — upon which life depend." During the Nixon administration, Congress passed the Clean Air Act of 1970, which established auto emissions standards to reduce pollution, and the Endangered Species Act of 1973 to protect animal and plant species from extinction. Nixon also oversaw the expansion of the national parks system. At the same time, he insisted that the government's environmental policies be subject to cost-benefit analysis by the Office of Management and Budget to determine the effects of environmental policies on American business, a step that often impeded the implementation of effective protection measures.

Watergate

The vast majority of Nixon's domestic accomplishments occurred during his first term as president. After the election in 1972, Watergate largely consumed the administration's energies. "Watergate" refers to a collection of scandals that resulted in Nixon's resignation from the presidency in August 1974. The break-in at the Democratic National Committee headquarters, located in the Watergate apartment and commercial complex in Washington, D.C., occurred on June 17, 1972, but Watergate really began as early as 1970. During that election year, in an effort to capture the Congress for Republicans, the Nixon White House used a combination of appeals to the silent majority and attacks on Democrats as "radiclibs." Despite White House efforts, the Democrats retained control after the mid-term election.

CREEP

The Committee to Reelect the President, or CREEP, stepped up activities as the 1972 presidential election approached. The administration's "dirty tricks" included illegal intelligence gathering about Democratic candidates, the planting of salacious photographs of Senator Edward Kennedy in the *National Enquirer*, forging documents, leaking false statements about Democrats, and falsely canceling the campaign appearances of Democratic candidates. Donald Segretti served as CREEP's chief operator, and it was later learned that he had been paid

directly from a private White House fund. Nixon did not know of each specific operation, but he did approve of the general program to discredit his opponents. CREEP efforts in particular targeted Senator Edmund Muskie, the frontrunner for the Democratic presidential nomination. As a consequence of the interference, Muskie lost the nomination to George McGovern, a weaker candidate who the Republicans then tarred as a supporter of the "3A's: acid, abortion, and amnesty" (amnesty referred to McGovern's opposition to the Vietnam War.) Nixon won the election handily, but the Democrats continued to hold the majority of seats in both the House and the Senate.

Watergate in the Press

Seven men were implicated in the Watergate break-in. Five had been discovered in the act of burglarizing the Democratic National Committee headquarters. One of the five, James W. McCord, Jr., was a former CIA agent who worked as chief of security for CREEP. Two others, former White House aide E. Howard Hunt, Jr., and G. Gordon Liddy, CREEP general counsel, were also implicated in the crime. During the fall of 1972, the defendants were indicted and periodic news items appeared in *The Washington Post* (the beginnings of the investigations by reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein that helped to reveal the president's role in the cover-up). Nevertheless, Americans heard little about Watergate during the campaign; the judge in the case imposed a gag order and postponed the trial until after the election. Nixon himself dismissed the operation as a third-rate burglary. At a press conference three days after the event, he stated, the "White House has had no involvement in this particular incident."

The Implication of the White House

At the sentencing hearing in March 1973, James McCord charged that the White House had attempted to cover up its involvement in the break-in. McCord also claimed that during the trial he had perjured himself at the instigation of John W. Dean, III, counsel to the president. With the White House now implicated, a special prosecutor was appointed to investigate White House involvement. On April 30, Nixon announced the resignations of his close advisors, John Ehrlichman and H. R. Haldeman, White House counsel John Dean, and the Attorney General Richard G. Kleindienst. He also denied personal knowledge of either the political espionage or the later attempts to conceal White House connections to the burglary. In May, the Senate Select Committee on Presidential Campaign Activities (established in February and chaired by the Democratic Senator from North Carolina, Sam J. Ervin, Jr.) began to hold televised public hearings.

Nixon's Resignation

On July 16, 1973, Alexander P. Butterfield, a former White House staffer, revealed to the Senate committee that the president secretly taped conversations that took place in the Oval Office. The revelation resulted in subpoenas for the tapes from both the Senate committee and the Special Prosecutor, followed by the president's claim of executive privilege, a series of court rulings and appeals, and an order from the Supreme Court to turn over the tapes. The combination of the press investigation of illegal use of campaign funds, the indictment and conviction of former White House aides in the Watergate break-in and cover-up, the revelation of the many "dirty tricks" during the 1972 campaign, and the existence of an extralegal intelligence unit in the White House called the "plumbers" (allegedly to stop leaks to the press of information deemed detrimental to the administration), led the House Judiciary Committee to initiate a formal impeachment inquiry in May 1974. Between July 27 and July 30, the committee approved three articles of impeachment against the president for obstruction of justice, abuse of power, and contempt of Congress. Whether the full House would vote to impeach Nixon remained in doubt until August 5, when the president responded to the Supreme Court order and released three tapes previously withheld from investigators. The tapes contained the "smoking gun" that proved Nixon had criminally conspired to cover up the relationship between the burglars and the White House. With all support in Congress now gone, Nixon announced his resignation on August 8, effective at noon the next day. As Nixon left the White House, Gerald R. Ford, Nixon's vice-president, was sworn in as the thirty-eighth president of the United States.

Presidential Pardon

In 1975, Haldeman, Ehrlichman, and John Mitchell were convicted of conspiracy, obstruction of justice, and perjury. On September 8, 1974, President Ford sought to put an end to Watergate by granting the former president an unconditional pardon, but the distrust of an "imperial presidency," a president who considers himself and his administration above the law, has persisted throughout the late twentieth century. Witness "IranContraGate" during the Reagan administration and the Lewinsky scandal — "MonicaGate" — that paralyzed Clinton's presidency.

Questions to Consider

In his many public speeches as president, Richard Nixon spoke about the policies that marked his administration. In doing so, he began the process of shaping his

presidential legacy. As you read excerpts from Richard Nixon's presidential speeches, determine how Nixon wanted to be remembered. Look beyond Nixon's point of view and examine the ways in which Nixon's descriptions of his administration and the justifications he offered the public for his actions can help us understand and judge the legacy of such a complex president. Attempt to answer the following:

- What measures do you think historians will use to evaluate the Nixon presidency?
- Was Nixon evil incarnate?
- Did his policies successfully condition the political landscape, paving the way for Ronald Reagan and the conservative revolution of the late twentieth century?
- Did his foreign policy successes in China and the Soviet Union compensate for the debacle his policies led to in Vietnam and Cambodia? Or was his Vietnam policy an example of "peace with honor?"
- How should historians remember the thirty-seventh president?