



Kunhardt, "Abuse of Power"

RICHARD M. NIXON
"Abuse of Power"
 1969-1974

[From Philip Kunhardt Jr., et. al., *The American President* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1999), pp. 386-395].

"It's very difficult to psychoanalyze oneself," Richard Nixon once said. "Most people would give me rather low grades as far as 'charisma' and 'gregariousness' and all that sort of thing that the politician is supposed to have. . . . But the essence of every great leader I have known-and I'm not saying I'm great-he was a lonely man."

Richard Milhous Nixon was born in 1913 and grew up poor in the small town of Whittier, California. His mother was a well-educated Quaker, whom he called a saint. His father was uneducated, working many jobs, and had a reputation for starting arguments with just about everyone.

Picked on as a child, Nixon wasn't comfortable around anyone outside his own family. He once said he didn't like riding the school bus "because the other children didn't smell good." He grew angry and kept his feelings bottled inside. "If your anger is deep enough," he said, "you learn [to excel]." He became his grammar school's valedictorian. In high school, he became an accomplished debater. In college, even though he was unathletic, he pushed himself hard. "I just wasn't about to be a quitter," he said.

Graduating third in his class at Duke Law School, he married a California schoolteacher and cheerleading coach, Thelma Ryan, who was known by her nickname, Pat. Then, in World War II, he served ably behind the lines in the South Pacific, rising to the rank of lieutenant commander.

After the war, Nixon launched a campaign for Congress. Capitalizing on the increasing conservatism of postwar America, he became the junior congressman from California. He called it the beginning of a "non-controversial" career, but that all changed when Nixon came to serve on the House Committee on Un-American Activities and ruthlessly pursued the American diplomat Alger Hiss, a suspected Communist spy. Through hard work and perseverance, Nixon successfully discredited Hiss, but in doing so, he became known as a mean-spirited fighter who would do anything to win.

In 1952, just two years after he was elected to the Senate, thirty-nine-year-old Nixon was approached by General Dwight Eisenhower to be his vice-presidential running mate. During the campaign, the immensely popular Eisenhower stayed far above the political fray, leaving the mudslinging to Nixon, who was by then renowned for it. "You read about another bribe," Nixon blasted in one campaign appearance. "You read about another gangster getting favors from government. The people are sick and tired of it . . . of an administration which instead of

cleaning up is covering up scandals!"

But then Nixon himself was accused of corruption-personally profiting from a secret fund subsidized by wealthy supporters. To save his political career, he went on national television. "I know that you wonder whether . . . I am going to stay on the Republican ticket, or resign," Nixon said. "Let me say this. . . . I am not a quitter." The appearance, later called the "Checkers" speech-after the dog given to him as a gift that he vowed to keep-worked a public relations miracle and helped Nixon regain Eisenhower's enthusiastic endorsement. And the team went on to win the election easily.

As vice president, Nixon was given few responsibilities. But eight years later, he emerged from Eisenhower's shadow and made his own bid for the high office. Running against the charismatic John Kennedy, Nixon lost. Then, two years later, he suffered a second defeat that was even more shattering -the race for governor of California. Suddenly not even his closest friends thought he had a political future.

"As I leave you," Nixon said to a gathering of the press in California, "I want you to know, just think how much you will be missing-you don't have Nixon to kick around anymore. Because, gentlemen, this is my last press conference."

But in 1968, in a classic political comeback, Richard Nixon was once again a candidate for President. Sloughing off his old identity as a red-baiting anticommunist, he was "the new Nixon," a pragmatic spokesman for what he called "The Silent Majority." He ran on a promise to end the war in Vietnam and to restore law and order to a badly divided country.

"You are voting to restore the respect for America," he said. "And I say to you, that in our administration the American flag will not be a doormat for anybody." Implicit in Nixon's campaign speeches was a profound distrust of the nation's youth, and especially of its antiwar activists.

The election was almost as close as it had been in 1960, but this time Nixon won against Minnesota Democrat Hubert Humphrey. And at his victory celebration in New York City, he was exultant. "Having lost a close one eight years ago," Nixon said, "I can say this: winning's a lot more fun!"

From the day he arrived in the White House, however, Nixon demonstrated how much of a loner he still was. He insisted on more privacy, more free time, and more of a hierarchy in his staff than had been characteristic of former Presidents. He insisted on having two free days a week when people were kept away from him, something no President had demanded since Chester Arthur. Convinced that his capacity to wield power as President was linked to an ability to prevent information from leaking out, Nixon cast a cloak of secrecy around his presidential activities. Not even his staff knew exactly what he was working on. Operating secretly through his national security advisor, Henry Kissinger, Nixon largely bypassed the State and Defense departments. Once, he pointed to the Oval Office and said, "There's the State Department."

"We were obsessed with secrecy. As a matter of fact, I was paranoid or almost a basket case with regard to secrecy," he later admitted. "Unpredictability is the greatest asset or weapon that a leader can have. And unless he is unpredictable, he is going to find that he loses a great deal of his power."

His presidential style alienated many, but Nixon got results, compiling a distinguished record of domestic accomplishments. And he took rightful pride in his bold initiatives abroad. "I'm the President that opened relations with China after twenty-five years of no communication," he said. And as a proponent of détente, he became the first President ever to visit the Soviet

Union. It was Nixon who negotiated the first arms-control agreement with the Russians, a follow-up to Kennedy's earlier test-ban treaty.

But despite his best efforts, Nixon's impressive achievements were often overshadowed by his handling of the war in Vietnam. Believing that military pressure would speed up the peace process, Nixon ordered the secret bombing of Cambodia, then Laos. And when word of it leaked out, antiwar protests virtually caged the President inside the White House.

"We must realize that that is one of the necessary adjuncts of power," he said, "Those who have power are seldom popular."

From the nation's beginning, three great powers possessed by kings were deliberately withheld from the office of President: the power to declare war, the power of the purse, and the power of immunity from legislative oversight. Richard Nixon was beginning to invade each of these areas. His presidency was being called an "imperial presidency."

Despite his unpopularity in the press, Nixon successfully ran for a second term in 1972. But on the night of June 17, operatives of his "Committee to Re-elect the President" were arrested after breaking into the Democratic Party's national headquarters at the Watergate Hotel complex in Washington. Though Nixon denied any involvement in the affair, he secretly went to work on a cover-up.

For two years, Nixon used his powers as President to try to derail a mounting Watergate investigation. On October 20, 1973, he fired the Senate's special prosecutor, Archibald Cox, and transferred the investigation to the Justice Department. Attorney General Elliot Richardson, who resigned in protest, wrote that "a government of laws was on the verge of becoming a government of one man." Unbeknownst still was the fact that the illegal conduct dated back as far as 1969, and included a series of break-ins, buggings, and political "dirty tricks," as well as hush-money payments, falsification of documents, and the wrongful use of the IRS.

In July 1973, Congress discovered the existence of tape recordings of Nixon's Oval Office conversations. The voice-activated recording system had been set in place by the President himself. Nixon immediately went on the offensive to prevent the release of the tapes, claiming executive privilege, much as Grover Cleveland had done eighty-seven years earlier when he refused to turn over his files to the Senate. But unlike Cleveland's files, Nixon's tapes were pertinent to a criminal investigation. And a year later, on July 24, 1974, the Supreme Court unanimously rejected Nixon's assertion of executive privilege.

The end then came quickly. On August 5, Nixon's tape recordings proved he had been part of an illegal cover-up, an attempt to obstruct justice by using the CIA to thwart an FBI investigation. There was only one thing he could do now to stop the process from hurtling toward impeachment. Nixon informed his chief of staff, Alexander Haig, of his decision: "I said to General Haig that I would resign, but it would be with dignity and with no rancor. And then I thought a minute and I said, 'Well Al, I really screwed it up, didn't I?' He didn't have to answer."

Mr. Beckett
Current History

What does President Nixon characterize every great leader?

What was Nixon's religious practice?

What role did anger, because of adolescent badgering from other kids, play in Nixon's development?

What law school did Nixon attend?

List three government jobs Nixon was elected to.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

As a congressman, Nixon obtained the reputation as a "mean-spirited fighter who would do anything to win." What event earned him this reputation?

What is the Checkers Speech?

Nixon had several preferences as President of the United States. List four specific preferences.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

How much of a role did the cabinet play in Nixon's policy decisions?

What happened on the night of June 17th, 1972?

What does CREEP stand for?

What did Nixon do about the break in during the next two years?

What role did the tapes play in the downfall of Nixon?