

## *History's Verdict Still in the Making*

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**Nixon: A Life**, by Jonathan Aitken. *Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing, 1993.* *xiv+633 pp. \$28.00.*

History's judgment of presidents is slow in the making, and it frequently varies from the way presidents are perceived by their contemporaries. Not until personalities, media treatment, and popular emotions have faded from memory can the significance of their tenures be seen in perspective; and the perspective, moreover, is apt to be influenced by history yet to come. Thus it is, for example, that Abraham Lincoln and Harry Truman, though rated poorly during their lifetimes, came to be regarded as great and Warren G. Harding and Calvin Coolidge, though highly esteemed when in office, are now seen as inept failures.

The most controversial president of the twentieth century has been Richard Nixon, but it is too soon to know what history's verdict on him will be. Probably another generation or two will have to pass before passions have adequately cooled. When he left office

in utter disgrace in 1974, almost no one would have predicted that he would ever be ranked higher than dead last. And yet, though confirmed Nixon haters will go to their graves hating him, the generally favorable comments upon the occasion of his funeral suggest that his star may rise again, as it did so often after seemingly final defeats during his lifetime.

One scholar who predicts the rise is the British M.P., Minister of State for Defense, and historian, Jonathan Aitken. As a European, Aitken brings to his analysis in *Nixon: A Life* a breadth and impartiality that no American writer about Nixon has been able and willing to muster. Moreover, he has had access to a large corpus of sources, including interviews with virtually all the principals in the story and previously untapped diaries and memoranda. He plumbs every rumor and charge circulated about Nixon, finds a few of them well-

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founded, and paints his subject warts and all. But his overall judgment is that Nixon was both a good man and a great president.

Let us consider first the personal makeup of this figure whom so many Americans regarded as enigmatic, if indeed not hollow. We begin with the purely positive side. One driving force was that Nixon was a man of deep religious convictions, held in an entirely private way. From his Quaker mother and grandmother he learned, most importantly, a "passion for peace and a passion for privacy," along with a yearning to be a peacemaker. From experience as a religious outsider, he developed an antipathy toward bigotry, whether based on religion, ethnicity, or race. And there was a quality that presumably derived from the Christian teachings of the Society of Friends—not a part of his public persona, but evident to all who knew him—namely, that in personal relations he was extremely thoughtful, kind, and generous. Aitken cites many instances of his little acts of kindness.

He was, moreover, a man of almost awesome learning and intelligence. As a child he was fluent in Latin and read widely in the classics. In college he read, among others, Hobbes, Locke, Hume, Shakespeare, Durant, Bacon, Kant, Villon, Darwin, Voltaire, Balzac, de Tocqueville, and Rousseau. During his "wilderness years," 1963-1967, he read voraciously the works of philosophers, historians, and statesmen, including those statesmen he most admired, Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, Charles de Gaulle, and Winston Churchill. As president,

he once asked Daniel Patrick Moynihan for a list of the "ten best political biographies"; within five weeks, despite the pressure of his duties, he had read them all and was asking for more. And until the end of his life he continued to read and learn. His thirst for knowledge never slaked.

As for his intelligence, it was keen, quick, and retentive, and it was more. He had a capacity not only for taking in and holding information, but also for drawing appropriate generalizations, seeing patterns, sensing structures, and manipulating and recombining ideas. So concludes Aitken. I am able to confirm Aitken's judgment from personal observation. I was privileged to meet Nixon only once, at a dinner party at his New Jersey home late in 1992, attended by half a dozen others, mostly philosophers and historians. The conversation, which lasted about four hours, was dazzling, and he was ahead of us most of the way, even though the talk was mainly on our turf. In my judgment, only five other presidents were possibly as learned—Jefferson, the two Adamses, Wilson, and Hoover—and none was more intelligent.

One tangential feature of his intelligence is worth noting. In the White House, Nixon surrounded himself with people who were shrewd and tough, the likes of Bob Haldeman and John Ehrlichman. Though they were necessary to keep the administration in efficient working order, they were intellectual lightweights. Sometimes the president wanted to be alone with his thoughts, while at others his restless, probing mind made him want to

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talk to someone at length. Usually the talk was serious, but on occasion he liked to indulge himself in “truly outrageous statements” as a way of letting off steam and separating the practical from the impractical. His aides listened “with silence or even acquiescence,” sometimes worrying about how the tapes would sound to historians. The tapes in fact sound a bit goofy at times, which means that they must be studied with caution. Too, the practice of tossing around bad ideas led to trouble during the second term, when various zealots and sycophants learned to circumvent Haldeman and translate the maunderings into practice.

Which leads us to the more complex aspects of Richard Nixon’s psyche. He was fiercely combative and competitive, a dauntless fighter who was often down but never out. Whether his reputation as “tricky Dick” was justified is moot. Aitken makes a good case that it was not, partly because in his private life Nixon was scrupulously honest and honorable, partly because of the many occasions when he could have profited from being ruthless but scorned the low road—such as defusing instead of capitalizing on John Kennedy’s Catholicism in 1960 and then refusing to challenge the bogus returns from Texas and Illinois. Aitken also shows that Nixon was repeatedly subjected to vicious trickery by his opponents for Congress, the Senate, the vice-presidency, and the presidency. It is Aitken’s conviction that not until 1972 did Nixon finally decide that since his enemies played dirty, he

must play dirty too. That verdict rings true; and if it is true, it is a mark of poor political judgment and lack of cunning on Nixon’s part, for in 1972 he could have won re-election without trying. It suggests that, far from having the instinct for the jugular as his opponents claimed, Nixon was actually somewhat naive and overly scrupulous as a politician.

Yet, combative as he was, he was strangely nonconfrontational. This was a trait that he shared with Thomas Jefferson, and as with Jefferson, his aversion to facing people down led many to think him hypocritical and insincere. The nonconfrontational quality was part of a larger body of attributes having to do with interpersonal relationships. From his teens onward, he craved to be regarded as “one of the boys,” but he was too shy, too lacking in social self-confidence, too inept at banter and small talk. Nor was he comfortable with the political gossiping that was the staple at social functions; the Georgetown set and Ivy Leaguers in general were contemptuous of him, as they were of most outsiders, and Nixon, the consummate outsider, reciprocated the animosity. Not surprisingly, he had few genuinely intimate friends.

On the other hand, when campaigning or in serious conversation, he was warm, confident, and poised—if the audience or company was fairly small. When addressing larger groups, he seemed ill-at-ease, stiff, and artificial, even phony. To many people, especially academicians and those in the news media, he came across that way on television as well.

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Aitken provides some interesting evidence that other people regarded him differently. For one thing, the 1952 "Checkers" speech was a masterful performance: when Nixon finished defending and explaining the political fund that had been established for him by California businessmen, the camera crew was reduced to tears. His televised addresses as president were uniformly attacked and denigrated by the media, but almost until the very end they struck deep chords among what Nixon called the silent majority of ordinary Americans and sent his approval ratings soaring. As for the first televised debate with Kennedy in 1960, Nixon admittedly looked haggard and sounded somewhat disorganized, but Aitken informs us of something that only a handful of insiders knew at the time, namely, that he was ill with an infected knee, under heavy medication, and running a fever.

Let us now turn to Nixon the president. Aitken's belief that Nixon's presidency was a great one rests upon an observation that can be encapsulated in a single sentence: "He went to China." From 1946 until 1972, the United States and the Soviet Union were locked into a Cold War in which each camp viewed the other as a monolithic, ideologically driven monster bent on world domination. Each viewed every occasion of unrest or instability on the planet as being inspired by the other, and each repeatedly followed stupid, destructive, and dangerous courses of action in response. During his "wilderness years," Nixon traveled geographically as well as intellectually and came to

realize what no American public figure was willing to say: that the perception on both sides was false, and that the Soviet Union and China, far from being at one, were terrified of, and hostile toward, each other. He understood that with luck and great skill he could replace the old bipolar structure of confrontation with triangular diplomacy, which Aitken describes as "an ingenious concept balancing the national interest priorities"—not the ideological predilections—of the three powers involved. Furthermore, given his credentials and reputation as an anti-Communist, "Nixon was the one twentieth-century President sufficiently bold, devious, and right wing to have the chance of pulling it off." The artfulness with which he directed the delicate negotiations—he was a great poker player—is almost astonishing. Thus did he serve, as he was taught as a child to serve, as a peacemaker.

Aitken's treatment of Nixon's diplomacy is masterful; he gives domestic policy rather short shrift. That is understandable, for at first Nixon himself was not especially interested in domestic affairs. "All you need is a competent Cabinet to run the country at home," he said. "You need a President for foreign policy." In any event, Aitken devotes comparatively little space to Nixon's domestic achievements, which had considerable impact. Perhaps the most important was racial desegregation: when he took office, only about ten percent of schools in the South were integrated, though it had been fifteen years since the Supreme Court had declared segregation

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tion in the public schools unconstitutional; when he left office, integration was almost complete, due to Nixon's persistent pressure combined with placation of Southerners. Also, at his prodding, Congress passed several environmental protection acts, increased funding for the arts and for cancer research, and voted a vast increase in such transfer payments as aid to mothers with dependent children, food stamps, and medical care.

There were other important domestic actions as well, but Aitken mentions these merely in passing, if at all. One was impoundment, a selective refusal to spend money that Congress had appropriated, practiced by a succession of presidents starting with Jefferson. In December of 1972, in an effort to bring the budget under control, Nixon began a campaign of impoundment designed to end certain congressional programs in their entirety. Congress reacted by passing, over Nixon's veto, the Congressional Budget and Impoundment Control Act, which virtually ensured runaway deficits in the future.

Other oversights have to do with administration. Nixon's original notion that the Cabinet could "run the country at home" proved illusory, for career bureaucrats actually ran the department heads. ("They go off and marry the natives," as Ehrlichman put it.) In an effort to control the bureaucracy, Nixon built his own bureaucracy, doubling the White House staff to more than 4,000. That failing to produce results, he announced plans to form a sort of supercabinet. Watergate prevented implementation of that

scheme, and a panel of public administrators later told the Senate that it would have created a Germanic "ideal type of monocracy, ruled from the top through a strictly disciplined hierarchical system."

As for Watergate, Aitken has studied the matter thoroughly and drawn heavily upon the account by Len Colodny and Robert Gettlin in their 1991 book, *Silent Coup*. His account of the affair runs roughly as follows: The man who instigated the break-in at Democratic National Committee headquarters was John Dean, who was seeking not political data but hard evidence about a call-girl ring, evidence which he intended to use for personal aggrandizement. When Nixon learned of the burglary he was dumfounded, then angered by the stupidity of it. To cover himself, Dean wove a web of deceit, telling Haldeman, who passed it to the president, that the break-in had been done on orders from John Mitchell, who had recently resigned as Attorney General to direct the Committee to Re-Elect the President. Dean also told Haldeman, who told Nixon, that Mitchell proposed to use the CIA to stop the FBI's investigation. On that misinformation, Nixon agreed to support the cover-up, mistakenly thinking that he was saving the skin of Mitchell, his closest political friend, who was just then plagued by serious personal problems. "If ever there was a moment in his adult life," Aitken writes, when Nixon "needed to vanquish" his lifelong aversion to personal confrontations, this was it. "For once Nixon knew, or thought he knew, that Mitchell was heavily implicated,

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the obvious and indeed imperative move for the President to make was to call in his old friend for a one-on-one confrontation. Had this happened, it is extremely unlikely that Watergate would ever have exploded into a political crisis. For Mitchell did not need to be protected by a cover-up. His hands, though not completely clean, were far from being tainted by criminal guilt." But Nixon did not call Mitchell, and the rest, as they say, is history.

Yet there was more to it than that. Aitken underestimates, as did Nixon, two sets of enemies who were determined to cripple or destroy the president by whatever means became available. One set was the Democratic (and some Republican) members of Congress, who were enraged by what

they perceived as usurpation of congressional authority by both Nixon and his predecessor, Lyndon Johnson. One example of their animus was the War Powers Resolution, passed in November of 1973. The other deadly enemies were the news media. When television newscasters, in particular, demonstrated a hostility toward Nixon, he made the grave mistake of going on the attack (mainly through Vice President Spiro Agnew), and the attack inspired counterattack. The attitude in some media quarters was that they had brought down Johnson, and the time had come to bring down another president.

And so they got him. But to return to where I started, who gets whom in the long run is yet to be determined.