

Nixon's dark side has obscured his greatness



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A hundred years after his birth, it is time to reassess the disgraced president's legacy

When Richard Nixon resigned the Presidency of the United States over Watergate in 1974 he was widely reviled as the worst ever occupant of the White House. But perceptions of his record have been changing. As the 100th anniversary of his birth approaches next week, a reassessment of his leadership and legacy seems timely.

Nixon was a character of Shakespearean complexity. In the late Eighties I took four years to write his biography, spending well over a hundred hours in conversation with him. In this process I saw fascinating glimpses of both his darkness and his greatness. They explain why, to this day, he polarises American opinion more than any other former president.

There is still a vociferous group of Nixon-haters in the American media. Yet there is also a substantial Nixon fan club among foreign policy specialists and centrist

Republicans. Between these extremes, most average Americans remain baffled by the ambivalent character of this strange, talented loner who fought through hardscrabble poverty to high peaks of achievement from which he fell to the depths of political disgrace.

Nixon's most enduring achievements were made in the arena of foreign policy. When he made his ground-breaking visit to China in 1972 he brought that country out of dangerous isolation. He was the first US president to go to Moscow, where he negotiated the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty, breaking the ice of Cold War nuclear hostility. Other Nixonian achievements, with full honour to the role played in them by Henry Kissinger, included saving Israel from near annihilation in the 1973 war and eventually signing the peace treaty with North Vietnam. By the time Nixon left office he had brought peace to millions, even if he had not found it for himself.

On the home front, Nixon was a creative innovator. He desegregated southern schools, which neither JFK nor LBJ had achieved. He ended the compulsory call-up of the draft. He launched the Environmental Protection Agency. He created more new national parks than any other president and started the federally funded war on cancer. Tom Wicker of *New York Times* thought so highly of these policies that he wrote in praise of Nixon as "the domestic liberal".

Substantial as his presidential achievements were, they became completely overshadowed by the dishonour of Watergate. Although Nixon had no foreknowledge of the burglary of the Democratic National Offices by the White

House "plumbers", he created the atmosphere in which such a folly could happen. He participated in the cover-up knowingly and lied about it repeatedly. Some of his Oval Office conversations, so embarrassingly preserved for posterity on the White House tapes, were unbelievably tawdry and sleazy. The author Theodore H White was right to label these combined horrors as "a breach of faith" between the president and the American people. This is why Nixon had to go, the only holder of his office to be forced into resignation.

I came to know Nixon well during his most difficult years of disgrace. Long before I thought of writing his biography I accompanied him to a rowdy Oxford Union in 1978 when, in answer to a hostile student questioner on Watergate, he retorted, "You're right. I screwed up. And I paid the price. Mea culpa. But let's get on. You'll be here in the year 2000 and we'll see how I'm regarded then."

With an eye on how 21st-century history would regard him, Nixon spent the last phase of his life in the unique endeavour of running for ex-president. He was surprisingly successful. Despite the taunts of his critics he clawed his way back to a position of respected eminence as a foreign policy sage. He was greatly in demand as a speaker who knew his geopolitical statecraft both practically and intellectually. He had moments of prophetic foresight. I shall always remember a talk he gave in my house to the Conservative Philosophy Group on the day when the news came out of the Vatican that an unknown Cardinal Wojtyla of Warsaw had been elected Pope John Paul II. The late William Rees-Mogg,

then editor of *The Times*, asked Nixon if he thought the Conclave's choice would be a politically as well as a spiritually significant event. "You bet!" replied the 37th president. "A Polish Pope could be the spark to set alight a fire in Eastern Europe that will destroy Communism."

Towards the end of a good dinner with Nixon he would sometimes play the wise old uncle and offer advice, as he put it "from an old politician to a young politician". His pearls of wisdom ranged from speaking techniques to how to decide when to kick an opponent "in the nuts". On one occasion he went off on a tangent about how to cope with personal failure and disgrace. "Something I really know about," he muttered in a poignant aside.

At the time I never considered the possibility of such an outcome in my own life. But fortunately I did not forget his wise words: "Failure is not falling down. Failure is falling down and not getting up again to continue life's race."

This is good advice – whether to an ex-president or to an ex-prisoner, or to anyone battling their way through bad reverses. For Nixon learnt the hard way that life is a long game, that perceptions change, and that what matters most is finding the wintry courage to show resilience in adversity. By his resilience he rebuilt much of his own reputation in his own lifetime. A hundred years on from his birth, his legacy looks solid and the memories of his character flaws are fading. On the stock exchange of history, shares in Nixon are a good buy.

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