

The Legacy of Richard Nixon: He shall live in infamy

He left a legacy of enduring cynicism, for which he deserves to remain forever unforgiven, argues the Post-Gazette's executive editor

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By David M. Shribman / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Richard Nixon no longer walks among us, having departed this earth a full two decades ago. But the ghost of the enigmatic figure who 40 years ago this week resigned the presidency — a position described by Franklin Roosevelt, still the man against which all subsequent presidents are measured, as “pre-eminently a place of moral leadership” — lingers among us, and he is a curious character indeed:

Awkward in manner — but shrewd in judgment. Flawed in character — but peerless in vision. Much misunderstood — but possessed of a peerless understanding of human nature. Tarred with mendacity — but a political magus nonetheless.

How soon we forget, and how smoothed by the years are the edges of a man Harry Truman — who in his own revisionist reverie is now regarded as a beacon of plain-spoken wisdom — once described as a “no-good, lying bastard,” a base scoundrel who, the 33rd president said, “can lie out of both sides of his mouth at the same time, and if he ever caught himself telling the truth, he’d lie just to keep his hand in.”

This is not one of those cases where the truth is right there in the middle. Richard Nixon deserves to live on in opprobrium, for high political crimes and misdemeanors.

The presence of the word “high” in Section 4, Article 2, of the Constitution — describing the basis for impeachment, which Nixon

avoided only by resigning in disgrace — was not meant as synonym for “serious.” It meant crimes conducted by officials in “high” positions, an implicit indication that the nation’s founders expected top officeholders to hew to higher standards than those common in others.

In that case, and in that case only, the Framers agreed with Nixon that the president was above the law.

For all those crimes — regarding the presidency as a perch to conduct a political range war, confusing the values of national security with the virtues of domestic life, besmirching the reputations of his rivals and on some occasions conducting clandestine operations against them — Nixon’s most enduring legacy is not what laws he broke but what customs of civic comportment he shattered.

Nixon admired Bismarck, and in his shabby revival of the Iron Chancellor’s reign delighted in the machinations of big-power diplomacy and the confusion created when liberal initiatives sprang from conservative principles — sickness and disability insurance in Bismarck’s case, environmental and health care proposals in Nixon’s. But Nixon merely followed the Bismarck precept of listening for “the steps of God sounding through events” and then having the guile to “leap up and grab the hem of His garment.” His ideology was opportunism.

Nixon’s defenders speak of his far-sighted policies, but in truth he only made the inevitable imminent. Someone else eventually would have recognized Red China, another president likely would have reached out to Soviet Russia. But only Nixon poisoned our civic life with a cynicism that remains an American contaminant.

Indeed, in the entire arc of American history — slavery, civil war, a Depression, two worldwide military conflicts, countless smaller ones — the word “amoral” appears more often in the American conversation in the Nixon years than in any other time of our national life. This is a measurable fact.

As to the argument that Nixon brought into national service an astonishing group of distinguished figures, from George H.W. Bush and Bob Dole to Paul Volcker and Elliot Richardson, let us add a few other names: John Mitchell, John Ehrlichman, H.R. Haldeman, Charles Colson. All served prison terms.

The Nixon bench, moreover, had a rival roster, including some of the figures who comprised the congressional “Watergate Class” that

produced a Democratic gain of 49 House seats in 1974. Or consider simply some of the young staffers of the House Judiciary Committee impeachment inquiry, also arguably brought into public life by Nixon: a future secretary of state (Hillary Rodham), White House counsel (Bernard Nussbaum), Massachusetts governor (William Weld) and Boston Red Sox president (Lawrence Lucchino).

That's without even considering the effect the Nixon experience had on some of the shimmery youth drawn into the presidential circle by duty and idealism, often against the ardent advice of friends and mentors whose distrust of Nixon dated to his Red-baiting and treachery "Checkers" speech that salvaged his position on the Republicans' 1952 national ticket.

"The qualities that kept some from joining Nixon's administration became more visible, particularly after the revelation of the tapes, which showed both dishonesty and how the bile of resentment was corroding his best intentions and closing down his ability to realize his promise," one of them, John Price, a Rhodes Scholar who succeeded Daniel Patrick Moynihan as special assistant for urban affairs and later headed the Federal Home Loan Bank of Pittsburgh, told me. "Those still in place as his presidency collapsed were caught in the trap of a vicious survival fight and the collapse of their hopes to leave positive and lasting changes in government."

During Senate Watergate Committee hearings, Gordon Strachan, a Nixon aide, was asked what he might say to young people contemplating public service. "My advice," he replied, "would be to stay away."

Nixon took the "credibility gap" created by Lyndon Johnson and rendered it enduring. With the retirement of LBJ, the nation had reached the juncture where, as A.J.P. Taylor said of German history in 1848, it had "reached its turning point and failed to turn." The suspicion and distrust of the Johnson years only deepened, and then became permanent.

These days it is fashionable to measure Nixon by coffee spoons, a dollop of disgrace balanced by a splash of brilliance that somehow dilutes the dishonor. "He committed abuses, but why should they disappear because he did a few good things or even a lot of them?" asks Timothy Naftali, director of the Nixon Presidential Library and Museum from 2007 to 2011. "That would mean we're a nation of cynics."

And that is what those who believe Nixon is "one of us" mean. But if we are a nation of cynics, Nixon stands indicted for making us that way. Thomas Jefferson said, "Honesty is the first chapter in the book of wisdom." Nixon lived by an abridged version of that book.

His recent predecessors (Franklin Roosevelt and John Kennedy come to mind) and his successors (Ronald Reagan and probably Bill Clinton, too) spruced up the American presidency. Richard Nixon tore away the greenery. For that, never forgive him.

David M. Shribman, executive editor of the Post-Gazette, won a Pulitzer Prize in 1995 for his coverage of national politics (dshribman@post-gazette.com, 412-263-1890).