



He was born poor. His poverty was not abject, but rather a poverty of those circumstances that today are considered to confer “privilege” on one person over another. His family was not wealthy or even middle-class, his father was essentially a failure at farming lemons, he had no “connections,” he wasn’t ugly but not particularly handsome either. Nixon’s mother Hannah, a devout Quaker (“my mother was a saint”), gave him the determination, strength and resilience that served him throughout his long career. The strength does not appear to have been strength of character but rather dogged persistence and willingness to suffer humiliation without showing weakness, at least not publicly.

He willed himself to be popular and athletic in high school, to learn to play musical instruments, and to move on to excel at the local college. His future probably lay in some mid-level business situation (car dealer?), until, first, he received a full Duke law school scholarship. He returned to southern California to practice and tried his hand at drama, where he met his wife Pat, a similarly stoic product of a poor but proud family.

Second, World War II took him out of the bounds of his small-town law practice existence and thrust him into a world sized to fit his ambitions. He went to Washington to work in the massive New Deal bureaucracy but very quickly chose to forfeit his Quaker exemption from military service and enlist in the Navy, where he emerged as decorated (non-combat) Lieutenant Commander.

Dick and Pat came home to the very special circumstances of post-war Orange County California, where increasing wealth and desire for political stability among war veterans created a dramatic shift to the Republican party. Convinced by the local Republican leadership that he had what it took, Nixon ran for

Congress, campaigned against a liberal incumbent by implying he was a communist sympathizer, and won.

Nixon established himself as a conservative and an internationalist--both positions that would be hallmarks of his career. He supported the Marshall Plan but was an aggressive member of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) who was "made" when he caught State Department official Alger Hiss in a lie when Hiss denied knowing Whittaker Chambers, who accused Hiss of spying for the USSR.

In 1950 Nixon ran for the U.S. Senate. He faced Helen Douglas, who opposed the communist hunting tactics of HUAC. Nixon's determination and willingness to take a "low road" to win served him well--he called Douglas "the pink lady" and accused her of communist sympathies. He won both the seat and the nickname "Tricky Dick."

When Dwight Eisenhower decided to run for president as a Republican in 1952, he needed a proven conservative, preferably from the West, on the ticket. Nixon was nominated for vice president. Two months before the election, he faced his first possible disaster: the revelation of a donor "slush fund" for his personal use. Eisenhower was urged to drop Nixon from the ticket.

Eisenhower did not back Nixon but instead gave him the opportunity to clear himself. Nixon went on national television and gave his famous "Checkers Speech." Yes, he said, there was a fund. But no, he never used it for personal items. Then Nixon launched into an attack on his Democratic accusers, contrasting his wife Pat's "respectable Republican cloth coat" to the fur coats of his attackers' wives. The one gift he had accepted from a supporter? A cocker spaniel named Checkers for his six-year-old daughter Tricia.

Nixon the leader, caught in a potentially disastrous situation, single-handedly altered the situation by the force of his personality. The speech allowed Ike to

keep Nixon on the ticket, they won the election, and Nixon acquired a deep hatred and distrust of the press that never left him.

As Vice President, Nixon successfully took advantage of difficult situations to reinforce both his internationalism and his willingness to stand up to communism. He weathered violent leftist attacks in South America, and in 1959 engaged Soviet leader Khrushchev in the famous "Kitchen Debate" in Moscow, in which he argued for the merits of American democracy and capitalism over communism. The debate played very well in the United States.

It was the natural order of things that Nixon should be the Republican presidential candidate in 1960. The race between John F. Kennedy and Nixon was "too close to call" throughout, but may have been determined by a media failure that exceeded the success of the 1952 Checkers Speech--the first televised presidential debate. Kennedy was a "made for TV" politician and by contrast Nixon, who was ill and looked it, came across visually as lackluster and was similarly perceived by viewers. Kennedy was seen as winning the debate, though those who listened on radio gave the advantage to Nixon. The election was historically close, and Nixon lost--a crushing defeat from which few thought he could recover politically.

Nixon again confounded the doomsayers and chose to run for governor of California in 1962. Nixon's capacity for snapping back failed him and he lost. This time Nixon himself declared that his political career was over, but not without one supposedly final sneer to the press: "Just think, you won't have Nixon to kick around any more." What political future could be left after such a bridge-burning quote?

Leaving California for law practice in New York, Nixon once more remade himself, this time into the great leader and international statesman that he perceived might appeal to a country caught up in Vietnam and internal turmoil. The election of 1968 was his moment--and the Democrats, divided, disillusioned,

and ultimately demoralized by the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy, simply self-destructed. Nixon won a resounding victory.

Nixon's almost six years in office were marked by many successes, and successful political strategies. He swept the country in the 1972 election because he reformed the government, established the EPA, broadened the civil rights laws, expanded enforcement of affirmative action, and supported lowering the voting age to 18.

Finally he "opened" China to the west and started the "thaw" in the Cold War. But his great successes were undone by his deep-seated paranoid obsession with his enemies in the press and the political opposition. He sanctioned the tactics that included the Watergate break-in and a wide range of other abuses of government authority, and personally ordered that they be covered up with a series of lies and refusals to cooperate. This was all compounded by the revelation of tapes of internal White House conversations in which Nixon emerged as a crude, vengeful bigot.

Nixon's resignation under threat of an impeachment conviction was assumed to be the political and personal death and burial of this unique character on the American scene. But Nixon emerged yet again, not rehabilitated, but determined to have the last word as to his career and accomplishments. He wrote about his life and his successes and both admitted and rationalized his mistakes. When he died the country mourned him even as political opponents and the press went to great lengths to remind the public of his dishonesty and the damage he caused to Americans' perception of their government.

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