

# H-Diplo | ISSF Policy Series

## America and the World—2017 and Beyond, Part II

### *Comparing Richard Nixon and Donald Trump: A Preliminary Report*<sup>1</sup>

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What makes a great president?<sup>2</sup> For many observers of American presidents, it is character. In my civilian life, I reviewed restaurants for *The Detroit Metro Times*. In that capacity, I observed people eating and drinking activities that sometimes reveal character.

Richard Nixon became a wine connoisseur during his years “in exile” as a lawyer in New York City in the mid-sixties. At some White House dinners, he served his guests decent California wine while he himself drank Chateau Margaux or Chateau Lafite from a personal bottle whose label was hidden by the steward with a white serving napkin.<sup>3</sup>

At a small dinner for journalists in Donald Trump’s White House in 2017, dessert was one ice-cream scoop for the guests and two for the president.<sup>4</sup> In this character contest, the current president ranks below Nixon since he made no attempt to hide his boorishness.

#### *Backgrounds*

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<sup>1</sup> The author is grateful to Irwin F. Gellman, the current dean of Nixon scholars, for looking over the Nixon sections of this essay and to H-Diplo’s indefatigable, patient, and wise Diane Labrosse, who lured me out of a decade’s long retirement from writing to attempt this comparison.

<sup>2</sup> For Nixon’s presidency, I relied heavily on my, *The Presidency of Richard Nixon* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1999). Although much has been written about his presidency over the past two decades and many more tapes have been released, I believe my presentation of his activities covers most, but certainly not all, of the important aspects of his presidency. For Trump’s presidency, the main sources are newspaper and magazine articles as well as journalists’ treatment in books. Because of the current COVID-19 stay-at-home orders, I was unable to use a library to nail down original sources. Consequently, I “Googled” Trump and, sometimes, Nixon quotations and other material to underpin certain statements in the body of this essay. I was further limited because when I needed access to a source like the *Los Angeles Times* or the *Washington Post* I was often unable to do so because I do not subscribe to those newspapers. Even with this explanation or self-serving alibi, some may find my analysis under-footnoted. Yet, for example, is it necessary to document the well-known fact that U.S. polls have rarely found support for Trump above 50 percent during his presidency?

<sup>3</sup> Bruce Oudes, ed., *From the President* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989):40; AP, *Los Angeles Times*, 28 November 1988, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1988-11-28-mn-484-story.html>; Ben O’Donnell, “Red Wine, White House,” *Wine Spectator*, 17 February 2012, <https://www.winespectator.com/articles/red-wine-white-house-46416>.

<sup>4</sup> *Time*, 11 May 2017, <https://time.com/magazine/us/4775428/may-22nd-2017-vol-189-no-19-u-s/>.

I will return to character issues below, but first I will consider the backgrounds of these two men before they ascended to the presidency.<sup>5</sup> We know much about Nixon due to the still burgeoning cottage industry of psychologists, historians, and journalists who claim to be Nixonologists. One problem with this comparison is that his unique tapes, which were never meant to see the light of day, reveal a venomous, racist, and vain Nixon. Had we such complete tapes for many other presidents, including Trump, we probably would have found equally unflattering comments and behavior.

We know much less about Trump, his family, and of course, his ongoing presidency. Here we must rely especially on journalists' accounts of his background and presidency.<sup>6</sup> However, while we do not have tapes, he frequently says in public things that other presidents, like Nixon, would only have uttered in private. For example, he tweeted on 8 April 2020 his opposition to mailed-in ballots because that system might lead to larger voter turnouts that could hurt Republicans, whose game plan over the last few decades has been to suppress the vote.<sup>7</sup>

Nixon was born to a lower-middle-class family in California. He experienced many privations, from the death of two brothers to a father who had trouble earning a living in a variety of pursuits. He had a strong and well-educated mother who was a dominant influence on young Richard's early life.

Donald Trump was born in Queens, New York to a wealthy family with a domineering father who was prospering in real estate and an apparently non-influential mother who had been a domestic or a maid before she met her husband. Considering the money that his father stashed away for him in his youth, he was obviously born on third base and thought he had hit a triple.

Richard was an especially hard-working and bright student who excelled in all of his educational experiences from K-12 to Whittier College to Duke University Law School. He read non-fiction even while president and wrote many of his books and speeches by himself throughout his life. He took piano lessons, performed in school plays, and participated in sports but was so ungifted athletically that the best he could do in college was to make the last-string on the Whittier football team where he often took the place of a tackling dummy. Later on, he was a golfer and bowler and an avid sports fan. As president, he called in plays in real time to Coach George Allen of the Washington Redskins and on the weekend of 24-25 June 1972, after the Watergate break-in, he and his son-in-law David Eisenhower prepared for the press their all-time all-star baseball teams. He also was an early practitioner of inviting athletes and teams to the White House; and between his run for governor in 1962 and the 1968 election was offered the presidency of either baseball league and even the head of a new players' union.

Donald was most likely not an especially good student who, because of obstreperous behavior in elementary school, was dispatched to New York Military Academy. About his undergraduate work at Fordham and the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School we know little because his records have never been released. One might surmise from his innumerable misspellings and grammatical errors in his tweets, his "incredibly" limited vocabulary, as well as the fact that he does not read books, that whatever he learned at Wharton he has forgotten.<sup>8</sup> Even more than Nixon, he was a sports

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<sup>5</sup> Although, since its publication, Steven Ambrose's once-praised multi-volume biography has come in for a good deal of scholarly criticism, *Nixon: The Education of a Politician 1913-1962* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988) is still useful. For his early political years, see the solid revisionist *The Contender: Richard Nixon: The Congress Years, 1946-1952* (New York: The Free Press, 1999).

<sup>6</sup> Useful here is Stanley Karnish and Marc Fisher, *Trump Revealed* (New York: Scribner, 2016).

<sup>7</sup> Philip Bump, "Trump Who Has Lied About Voting for Years, Disparages Voting by Mail for Self-Serving Reasons," *Washington Post*, 4 April 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/04/08/trump-who-has-lied-about-voting-years-disparages-voting-by-mail-self-serving-reasons/>.

<sup>8</sup> I will take the liberty to use Trump's favorite adjective in several inappropriate places in this essay.

enthusiast, telling journalists that at one point he was the best baseball player in New York.<sup>9</sup> He is a good golfer although boxer Oscar de la Hoya, among others, reported about his cheating on the course.<sup>10</sup> He tried to buy a National Football League team, but the other owners did not let him in. Instead, in 1984, he purchased a franchise in the short-lived United States Football League. Like Nixon, he reveled in inviting winning sports teams to the White House, but unlike Nixon he occasionally had to withdraw invitations because some teams and players threatened to be no-shows. He did body slam and shave the head of World Wrestling Federation owner Vince McMahon at WrestleMania 23 in 2007.

When it came to his personal life, Nixon was a shy fellow, with few long-term relationships until he married the independent and strong-willed Patricia Ryan in 1940. With some ups and downs, their marriage lasted for fifty-three years until Pat's death in 1993. She was a relatively active First Lady who occasionally pushed the president to support some of her projects, although she failed to convince him to nominate a woman to the Supreme Court. Unlike many presidents such as Warren G. Harding, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy, and Bill Clinton, Nixon appeared to be a faithful husband without a whiff of scandal. He rarely had been heard to utter a curse word in public. On his tapes he seemed to awkwardly join in with his more foul-mouthed aides. Indeed, when portions of the tapes were first released, he tried to censor his off-color language, in part because he worried about what his mother, who died in 1967, would have thought.

Trump has been married three times, engaged in innumerable affairs, and has been charged by more than a dozen women with harassment and even rape. Melania Knaws, his First Lady, as far as we know, is less active publicly and privately than many previous First Ladies. Trump has been foul-mouthed on and off the record, and, has, in public, introduced curse words to the presidential lexicon an incredible number of times. Nevertheless, this libertine playboy owed his election to the huge evangelical vote that has been captured by the Republican Party. And this was in the face of his referring to “2 Corinthians” instead of “Second Corinthians” to a large crowd of evangelicals at Liberty University on 18 January 2016.<sup>11</sup>

As for experience as commander-in-chief, Nixon, who was involved in essential war-related work at the Office of Price Administration in Washington, nevertheless voluntarily enlisted in the Navy in 1942, even as he worried about what his Quaker relatives might think. He served three years in the Pacific, experiencing limited combat. Trump, who was eligible for the draft during the period of the Vietnam War, had a deferment because of bone spurs in his ankle.<sup>12</sup> He did tell shock-jock Howard Stern in 1997 that he had his own “personal Vietnam” during the period, trying to escape the “potential landmines” of sexually transmitted diseases.”<sup>13</sup>

Finally in this pre-presidential analysis, upon leaving the Navy in 1946, Nixon spent much of his life until retirement in elective office or on the hustings as a congressman from 1946 to 1950, senator from 1950 to 1953, vice president from 1953

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<sup>9</sup> Donald J. Trump on Twitter: “I played football and baseball, sorry, but said to be the best baseball player in NY State-ask coach Ted Dobias-said best he ever coached,” <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/319432090078830592?lang=en>.

<sup>10</sup> Charles Curtis, “Six People Who Say Donald Trump Cheats at Golf,” *USA Today*, 30 January 2018, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/ftw/2018/01/30/6-people-who-have-accused-donald-trump-of-cheating-at-golf/109934954/>.

<sup>11</sup> Jessica Taylor, “Citing ‘Two Corinthians,’ Trump Struggles to Make the Sale to Evangelicals,” *NPR*, 18 January 2016, <https://www.npr.org/2016/01/18/463528847/citing-two-corinthians-trump-struggles-to-make-the-sale-to-evangelicals>.

<sup>12</sup> Michael Cohen, Trump's former lawyer claimed that he told him that the deferment was fraudulent. Leo Shane III, “Trump Made Up Injury to Dodge Vietnam Service, his Former Lawyer Testifies,” *Military Times*, 17 February 2019, <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/pentagon-congress/2019/02/27/trumps-lawyer-no-basis-for-presidents-medical-deferment-from-vietnam/>.

<sup>13</sup> Ale Russian, “Trump Boasted of Avoiding STDs while dating: Vaginas are ‘Landmines...This is my Personal Vietnam,’” *People*, 28 October 2016, <https://people.com/politics/trump-boasted-of-avoiding-stds-while-dating-vaginas-are-landmines-it-was-my-personal-vietnam/>.

to 1961, Republican candidate for the California governorship in 1962, and president from 1969 to 1974, after which he wrote, aside from his memoirs, seven generally well received books devoted to politics and diplomacy. Despite having participated in school plays, he maintained his shyness and lack of spontaneity throughout much of his life, sticking to the script, even requesting talking points for his meetings with politicians and others who visited him in his official capacities. He was a traditional Republican but not an ideologue all of his life. When he ran for Congress in 1946, he ran as a 'liberal' Republican.

Trump was a businessman with investments in high-rise hotels and golf courses, an airline, a university, casinos, and wineries, among other ventures. He was not always successful and faced bankruptcy several times. His bankruptcies might be compared to Nixon's failed try for president in 1960 and California governor in 1962.

In 2016, Trump was certainly a multi-millionaire if not a billionaire. He was long a household name in New York City, speaking out frequently on public affairs, and a popular subject for the gossip columns. In fact, for a while he played his own press agent, John Barron, on the telephone calling newspapers and other media to offer gossip about his "client" Donald Trump.<sup>14</sup> Most Americans began to hear of him when he served as host of the "The Apprentice" and "Celebrity Apprentice," an NBC reality television series from 2004 to 2015. With no central ideology or even principles, he switched parties many times and once supported abortion rights and gun control. In politics, he was an opportunist and a pragmatist.

Trump engaged in scores of Republican debates during the 2016 campaign where he dissembled about his past statements and actions. Often, he displayed his lack of knowledge about the government and history, as when he appeared not to know what the Triad was.<sup>15</sup> He certainly was spontaneous, apparently unconcerned about inconsistencies. He claimed he won his three debates with Hillary Clinton, who, with her husband, had attended his wedding in 2006. Some online polls suggested as much but more reputable surveys revealed the opposite. He played hardball the likes of which the country had never seen referring to the "nasty woman," stalking behind her when she spoke, and bringing women who accused Bill Clinton of making unwanted sexual advances to one of the debates.

Although Nixon had received an award from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), his 1968 campaign engaged in a "Southern Strategy," with dog whistles to the once solid Democratic South that had begun to leave the fold after Lyndon Baines Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act (1964) and Voting Rights Act (1965) and other Democratic supported civil-rights legislation and actions. After he signed the 1964 act, LBJ lamented presciently, "I think we just delivered the South to the Republican Party for a long time to come."<sup>16</sup> Throughout the 1968 campaign and later, Nixon pursued his Southern Strategy, being less supportive publicly of civil rights than Republicans had been through much of the period since the Civil War. Yet it was during his administration that legal segregation in the South came to an end.

In his many campaigns, Nixon engaged in what his many liberal critics labeled dirty politics beginning in his 1946 congressional campaign and his 1950 senatorial campaign where he earned the nickname "Tricky Dick" whether or not he truly deserved it.<sup>17</sup> His reputation among liberal journalists, especially, had been already sullied by his successful leadership of the House investigation of Alger Hiss, who, as things turned out, did indeed have suspicious relationships with the Soviet

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<sup>14</sup> John Cassidy, "Trump's History of Lying. From John Barron to @Real Donald Trump," *New Yorker*, 24 April 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/our-columnists/trumps-history-of-lying-from-john-barron-to-realdonaldtrump>.

<sup>15</sup> Nick Gass, "Marco Rubio Schools Trump on Triad," *Politico*, 15 December 2015, <https://www.politico.com/blogs/live-from-the-venetian/2015/12/2015-gop-debate-rubio-trump-nuclear-triad-216828>.

<sup>16</sup> Robert Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and his Times, 1961-1973* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988):120.

<sup>17</sup> Greg Mitchell, *Tricky Dick, and the Pink Lady* (New York: Random House, 1997). Irwin Gellman makes a strong defense of Nixon in *The Contender*.

Union. Further, caricatures by the Pulitzer Prize-winning cartoonist Herblock (Herbert Block) so disturbed him that he banned the *Washington Post* from his home, hoping to shield his children from the unflattering images. *The Post* is one of Trump's main self-perceived media enemies.

During the 1952 campaign, as the vice presidential candidate, Nixon was the one who played hardball while his running mate, Dwight David Eisenhower, remained above the fray in good measure because the Democrats generally refrained from attacking the widely respected war hero. Thus, it was Nixon who referred to Democratic candidate Adlai Stevenson as holding a "Ph.D. from Dean Acheson's cowardly college of Communist containment." Despite such tough talk in 1952, Nixon did not come close to using slurs and nicknames like skank (Hillary Clinton), Lyin' Ted Cruz, slimeball (James Comey), Fat Jerry (Nadler), Cheatin' Obama, High Crime Nancy (Pelosi), Pocahontas (Elizabeth Warren) and scores of other demeaning epithets that appear almost daily in Trump's official presidential documents (tweets).<sup>18</sup>

During his campaign, Trump clearly pandered to American racism as he promoted a border wall to keep out Mexicans bringing "drugs, crime and rapists,"<sup>19</sup> suggested that a Mexican-American judge in one of his lawsuits could not be fair to him, and insulted the Muslim-American family of a war hero, among other overt racist pronouncements. And his main claim to fame in Republican politics was his leadership of the birther movement that contended that President Barack Obama had been born in Kenya.

Both presidents appealed to constituencies that opposed liberal elites and their alleged dominant cultural and political influence in the country. For Nixon, it was the white Silent Majority that reflected traditional American values in perceived opposition to urban violence and radicalism and the shattering of traditional norms of 'The Sixties.' Trump appealed to those who wanted to 'Make America Great Again,' once again the forgotten and maligned white citizens in fly-over country who were appalled by the apparent assault on religion, traditional values, and the promotion of political correctness.

There are few commonalities in the two presidents' backgrounds. Yet, despite these different resumes and approach to and experience in politics, both men have been described by historians and pundits as insecure, even as president. For Nixon, it might have been his humble background or his failure to be a glamorous and charismatic Kennedy. For Trump, it might have been a domineering father or his failure to be accepted by the Manhattan real-estate and social elites. In any event, both men as presidents demanded praise from their employees. For Nixon, it was mostly in private when he asked aides and cabinet secretaries to congratulate or compliment him on a speech or action.<sup>20</sup> For Trump, incredibly, it is in public on television, most every time he appears with his staff and cabinet, sometimes even to the point of threatening governors during the early days of the COVID-19 crisis who did not praise him enough. But I am not a psychologist, even though I sometimes play one in my writings. It is more fruitful to move on to their presidencies where we find more similarities than in their backgrounds.

### *Domestic Policies*

More than most presidents, we have a vast amount of documents and tapes for Richard Nixon because of the Watergate investigations and the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA). With an incredible amount of incessant tweets, leaks, and tell-

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<sup>18</sup>"List of Nicknames Used by Donald Trump," *Wikipedia*, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_nicknames\\_used\\_by\\_Donald\\_Trump](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_nicknames_used_by_Donald_Trump).

<sup>19</sup>Suzanne Gamboa, "Trump Announces Presidential Bid by Thrashing Mexico, Mexicans," *NBCNEWS*, 16 June 2015, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/donald-trump-announces-presidential-bid-trashing-mex-ico-mexicans-n376521>.

<sup>20</sup>Tom Curry, "Angry Nixon: New Tapes Reveal an Overwrought President in Grips of Watergate," *NBC News*, 21 August 2013, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/politics-news/angry-nixon-new-tapes-reveal-overwrought-president-grips-watergate-flna6C10972359>.

all memoirs from administration officials, we may know more about Donald Trump in his fourth year, than we know about the eight years of the Barack Obama presidency. On the other hand, it is way too soon for historians to offer as definitive an analysis of the Trump presidency as they can offer for the Nixon presidency, especially with the ongoing coronavirus crisis, which I will not examine in detail. Nonetheless, with caution, I will try to make the comparison, highlighting areas in domestic and foreign policy where comparisons are appropriate. Since Trump continues to make headlines every day, my cutoff point for this essay is 29 May 2020. However, I fear that by 1 June, there will be a score of new items to deal with that will make my analysis immediately outdated.

All presidents, sometimes inadvertently, shade the truth or even lie from time to time with whoppers like Bill Clinton's 'I did not have sexual relations with that woman' or Barack Obama's 'If you like your health care plan, you can keep it.' However, no president compares to Donald Trump, who, according to the *Washington Post* on 14 April 2020, has lied or made misleading statements over 18,000 times.<sup>21</sup> That is a long way from George Washington's alleged inability to tell a lie.

During Nixon's 1968 campaign, assisted by Roger Ailes among others, the Republican candidate held televised town-hall meetings that were meant to be open and free-flowing but had been staged by his brilliant media staff.<sup>22</sup> He encouraged journalists to say that he had 'a secret plan' to end the war in Vietnam after he hinted such a plan existed. It did not. Further, it is likely that his campaign accepted illegal financial funding that originated from supporters of the autocratic Greek government. Even more, on the eve of the election, he encouraged or perhaps even instructed his aides to convince the South Vietnamese government to reject the Johnson peace plan, and when Johnson discovered this meddling, he denied knowledge of it. Going into the final weekend of the campaign, Democratic Party nominee Hubert H. Humphrey enjoyed a slight lead that quickly evaporated after Saigon squelched the peace deal. Nixon won with 301 electoral votes and a popular-vote victory of around 200,000. However, he had to confront a Democratic Congress that would affect his legislative priorities. The nineteenth oldest president, Nixon was 56 in January 1969.

As demonstrated in the "Report on the Investigation into Russian Interference in the 2016 Presidential Election," or the Mueller report, while the special prosecutor found no conspiracy between the Trump campaign and Russia, he did find 272 contacts between Trump aides and Russian agents. On innumerable occasions to the present day, Trump called the report and congressional investigations a "hoax." It is highly likely that he owed his victory in 2016 in part to Russian assistance, particularly with the hacking and publication of Hillary Clinton's emails and communications among her staff and Russian trolling in social media that supported third-party candidate Jill Stein and tried to depress the African-American vote. Both ploys apparently worked to some degree. Trump won with 304 electoral votes but with an almost three-million-vote deficit in the popular vote. Unlike Nixon, for his first two years he enjoyed a Republican Congress. The oldest president in American history, Trump was 70 in January 2017.

Although Nixon served for six years and Trump has served for three-and-one half years as of this writing, after Watergate blew up in the winter of 1973, the former signed very little new domestic legislation. Of course, he was still active in his favorite pursuit, foreign relations. Moreover, he would have compared more completely with Trump had he been able to pursue his plan after his reelection to dispatch loyalists to all the departments and agencies to better control the higher bureaucracies and their civil servants whom he considered mostly Democrats—which they probably were.

Trump took office planning to 'drain the swamp,' even though many of his first appointees were swamp denizens. He also believed in the Republican Right's meme about the "Deep State," Washington D.C., bureaucrats who tilted the government in a leftward direction no matter what political appointees above them planned. Indeed, during a coronavirus press briefing,

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<sup>21</sup> Glenn Kessler, Salvador Rizzo, and Meg Ryan, "President Trump Made 18,000 False or Misleading Statements in 1,170 Days," *Washington Post*, 14 April 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/04/14/president-trump-made-18000-false-or-misleading-claims-1170-days/>.

<sup>22</sup> Joe McGinniss, *The Selling of the President* (New York: Trident, 1969).

he referred to Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's State Department as the "Deep State Department" as Pompeo stood next to him.<sup>23</sup> By this time, he had successfully replaced many of the appointed positions in the various departments and bureaus, installed many often unqualified acting secretaries and their assistants who did not need Senate confirmation, and no doubt was pleased to see an incredible amount of early retirements and reassignments by a large number of civil servants. More ominously, seriously threatening executive-branch oversight, Trump quietly fired five presumably apolitical inspectors general in April and May 2020, while the nation was naturally obsessed with COVID19 news. The 1978 law that established inspectors general was part of the Watergate era reforms. Only one inspector general had been removed from office since 2000.<sup>24</sup>

Nixon's White House was tightly organized by Chief of Staff H. R. "Bob" Haldeman, who, until 1973, fiercely controlled access to the Oval Office for his shy and introverted boss. He and chief domestic advisor, John Ehrlichman, who also ran a tight ship, were referred to as the Berlin Wall. Many members of his inner circle were experienced and respected figures like Arthur Burns, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Bryce Harlow, and Henry Kissinger. Compared to Trump's White House, there was relatively little turnover until 1973.

Trump's White House is a chaotic place, with a record-breaking number of staff turnovers, where the President is not sheltered from his friends to whom he often speaks on his own unsafe smartphone, and where aides such as his daughter and son-in law sometimes act independently of other staff members. Mark Meadows, Trump's fourth chief of staff, after only a few weeks on the job had apparently found it difficult to reform this White House.<sup>25</sup>

As for their respective domestic programs, Nixon, whether he wanted to embrace the sobriquet or not, was the greatest environmental president since Theodore Roosevelt. He said "people don't give a shit about the environment," and "In a flat choice between smoke and jobs, we're for jobs."<sup>26</sup> Yet with a strong push from a Democratic Congress, responding to the burgeoning environmental movement (the first Earth Day was 22 April 1970), he established the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, and signed into law or strengthened the Clean Air Act, a new Endangered Species Act, a Safe Drinking Water Act, among other environmental programs. Not surprisingly, many environmentalists thought he had not gone far enough in their direction. In any event, Nixon and his aides did listen to scientists.

Trump says he does not believe in climate science and has labeled it a Chinese "hoax." His EPA has revoked or attempted to revoke many of President Obama's executive orders in that area from auto-emission standards to clean water and air rules, to

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<sup>23</sup> *Washington Post* video, 20 March 2020, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/video/politics/trump-makes-deep-state-department-joke/2020/03/23/aaf8d7d3-53e7-4e77-83ff-964ee8cfff86\\_video.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/video/politics/trump-makes-deep-state-department-joke/2020/03/23/aaf8d7d3-53e7-4e77-83ff-964ee8cfff86_video.html).

<sup>24</sup> Robert Farley, "Trump Twists Record on Inspectors General," *Fact Check Posts*, <https://www.factcheck.org/2020/05/trump-twists-record-on-inspectors-general>.

<sup>25</sup> Maggie Haberman, "For Mark Meadows Transition from Chief of Staff is a Hard One," *New York Times*, 17 April 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/16/us/politics/trump-mark-meadows-chief-of-staff.html>.

<sup>26</sup> Tom Wicker, *One of Us* (New York: Random House, 1991):15; Stanley I. Kutler, *The Wars of Watergate* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1990):78; Small, *The Presidency of Richard Nixon*: 196.

the applause of some of his business allies as well as members of the Republican Party who fear that environmentalism is crushing the American economy.<sup>27</sup>

As for that economy, both presidents felt that its health was the key to reelection; in the immortal words of Clinton campaign aide James Carville in 1992, 'It's the economy stupid.' Unfortunately for Nixon, he assumed the presidency as the economy began to tank, in part because of runaway inflation. Thus, he adopted a variety of measures to stabilize the economy, including, before the 1972 election, his modified Phase II wage-and-price-controls, which would normally be an anathema to Republicans. They seemed to work until early 1973, when the economy went into a tailspin and Nixon jiggered his third makeshift economic plan. Manipulating the economy further, he engineered social-security increases in October 1972 while the payroll taxes to pay for them did not appear in paychecks until after the election. And he frequently tried to influence his former economic advisor, Arthur Burns, whom he appointed to head the Federal Reserve in 1970 to adopt his suggestions for that institution's actions. When Burns was appointed, Nixon told him "You see to it: no recession."<sup>28</sup> By 1972, he apparently had worn him down given that Burns adopted some of Nixon's prescriptions, opening the Fed to charges of playing electoral politics. His strong criticisms of Burns's inaction were generally done privately. Even in that fashion, they were unusual in terms of historical precedent.

Trump inherited a healthy economy that had chugged along with positive numbers since the Great Recession of 2008-09. Those numbers grew rapidly during his presidency until the Pandemic hit early in 2020. However, the unemployment and stock market numbers hid the fact that Americans had made limited salary gains since the nineteen seventies, a problem that would become evident with the financial crisis caused by the virus.<sup>29</sup> Yet, Trump continually boasted about his record unemployment numbers even during COVID-19 press briefings. Nonetheless, as things began to slow down in late 2019, and before the virus, he publicly harangued his appointed Federal Reserve Chair, Jerome Powell, to move the bank to announce lower and lower interest rates until they reached virtually zero. Not only would this boost the U.S. economy, he contended, it would level the playing field with trading partners.

Although Nixon signed a Tax Reform Bill in 1969, it was nowhere as significant as Trump's 2018 tax cut, one of the largest in American history. Touted as offering relief for everyone, 83 percent of the cuts went to business and high earners. Trump had hoped, among other things, that the cuts, soon to appear in individuals' paychecks, would influence their votes in the 2018 congressional elections. Although corporations loved the cuts, workers, in general, saw little relief in their paychecks that year. More important, instead of using the new cash to expand, many businesses plowed their tax dividends back into the company by buying back stock.

As for trade, Nixon, like most Republicans since WWII, generally believed in free trade. But his main bête noire was Japan, a close ally, whom he thought had taken advantage of the United States, especially in the textile industry. Consequently, he established new import quotas that did not go as far as U.S. industries and unions had hoped for, but for them, it was a step in the right direction. In 1973, the country enjoyed the greatest trade surplus in its history. He blamed previous administrations and the State Department for not protecting American industry better. It is also interesting to note that

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<sup>27</sup> Dominique Browning, "An Earth Day We Can't Celebrate," *New York Times*, 22 April 2020, A29; Nadja Popovich, Kendra Pierre-Louis, and Livia Albeck-Ripka, "All 98 Environmental Rules The Trump Administration is Revising or Rolling Back," *New York Times*, 10 May 2020, 30-31.

<sup>28</sup> Wyatt C. Wells, *Economist in an Uncertain World: Arthur F. Burns and the Federal Reserve* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994): 42.

<sup>29</sup> Alissa Quart and Yaryna Serkez, "Who Has Enough Cash to Get through the Coronavirus Crisis," *New York Times*, 26 April 2020, 2SR.



when Nixon announced his America-First type New Economic Policy in 1971, which among other things took the country off the gold standard, he did it without consulting or even informing U.S. allies in advance.

Since the beginning of his administration, Trump has taken the venerable Republican Party from a free-trade party to a protectionist party whose policies would thrill American industrial workers and their leaders, many of whom voted for him in 2016 on the soon-to-be fulfilled promise that he would shake up the international economic system. And like Nixon, he assailed his “stupid” predecessors who allowed the country to be fleeced by China, especially, but also by Europe, Mexico, and Canada among others—which was most countries.<sup>30</sup> He was successful in reshaping the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) somewhat, received preliminary concessions from China, and waged ongoing tariff wars with the European Union.

Another area of common interest is law enforcement and criminal justice. During a turbulent era of a perceived increase in criminal activities, Nixon’s response was his ‘War on Drugs.’ It was an interesting contrast to Johnson’s ‘War on Poverty,’ since it was directed *sotto voce*, in part, at the alleged criminal activities of African-Americans.<sup>31</sup> Nixon also went to war against left-wing protestors and others responsible for unprecedented uncivil disobedience and bombings. His intelligence agencies stepped up their illegal surveillance and their employment of agents provocateurs. When the FBI would not continue their illegal practices, Nixon came close to establishing his own White House FBI with the aborted Huston Plan. He did set up the ‘Plumbers,’ a small group of White House aides who were supposed to find administration leakers as well as facilitate wiretapping and break-ins. Although Nixon was never as brazen in public about presidential authority as Trump, he did say in his 1977 televised interviews with David Frost that “When the president does it, that means it is not illegal.”<sup>32</sup>

Trump, on the other hand, pushed by celebrities like Kanye West and Kim Kardashian, as well as the bipartisan Congress, signed a justice reform bill, the First Step Act, in 2019. But, like Nixon he had a war, not on crime and drugs but against immigrants and asylum seekers, many of whom, he claimed, were engaged in criminal behavior. He ordered the Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency (ICE) and other federal immigration agencies to step up deportations and reject asylum seekers by employing methods and programs, including the separating and caging of juveniles, which, according to court decisions, violated U.S. laws. He believes in Attorney General William Barr’s position on presidential supremacy, the unitary president, and went even further in public than Nixon would have ever dared when he exclaimed that the Constitution says, “I can do whatever I want as President.”<sup>33</sup>

Finally, on criminal justice, both presidents, more than most presidents, made controversial pardons and commutations. Nixon commuted the sentence of the My Lai massacre’s leader, Lt. William Calley, as well as the sentence of former Teamster president James Hoffa, which was most likely a quid pro quo for Hoffa’s support in the 1972 election. Trump pardoned controversial Sheriff Joe Arpaio, conservative writer Dinesh D’Souza, and Navy Chief Petty Officer and Seal Eddie Gallagher, among others, with some jailed and indicted aides most likely awaiting a pardon after the 2020 election. One aide who did not have to wait was Michael Flynn, for whom Attorney General Barr dropped the Justice Department’s case against him while he was awaiting sentencing after having pled guilty twice to lying to the FBI.

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<sup>30</sup> “Trump Complains About STUPID TRADE with China,” *CNBC*, 9 April 2018, <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/04/09/trump-complains-about-stupid-trade-with-china.html>.

<sup>31</sup> *Equal Justice Initiative*, “Nixon Advisor Admits War on Drugs was Designed to Criminalize Black People,” 25 March 2016, <https://eji.org/news/nixon-war-on-drugs-designed-to-criminalize-black-people/>.

<sup>32</sup> Kutler, *The Wars of Watergate*, 614.

<sup>33</sup> <https://www.c-span.org/video/?c4809509/user-clip-trump-constitution-i-president>.

As for other extra-legal behavior, Nixon, in his relations with Congress, frequently impounded funds it had authorized in legislation with which he disagreed. Although this on rare occasions had been done by previous Presidents, he impounded funds for more than 100 programs. In 1974, Congress passed the Budget and Impoundment Control Act by margins of 75-0 and 401-6 to make it far more difficult for a President to refuse to spend money allocated to the Executive Branch by Congress. When Trump refused to spend congressionally authorized aid for Ukraine in 2019, he most likely violated the act. And he threatened to violate it again in 2020, when he considered withholding funds from the World Health Organization

In terms of other domestic programs, Nixon signed into law Title 9 of the Education Amendments of 1972 that prohibited discrimination on the basis of sex in federally funded educational programs, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), the all-volunteer army, and a bill to permit 18-year-old voting, as well as increased funding for the arts and humanities and cancer research. Along with his environmental laws, he produced an overall record that might have been promoted by Hubert Humphrey had he won the presidency. He did try to revoke parts of the Great Society such as the Office of Economic Opportunity, but generally failed in that mission. This compares to Trump's three-year crusade to rescind almost everything that the first president from Kenya had done while blaming him for everything that has gone wrong with the United States including the failure to prepare for COVID-19. Indeed, he even changed Michelle Obama's healthy school-lunch program back to its previous not-especially-healthy menu and his Education Department amended Title 9 rules to give those who are accused of sexual misconduct more of a say in the judicial process.<sup>34</sup>

As for the courts, Nixon had to deal with a Democratic Senate. He successfully appointed Warren Burger, a solid Republican, as Chief Justice. But he failed spectacularly with Clement F. Haynesworth Jr. and C. Harrold Carswell, two Southerners who were part of his Southern Strategy. Haynesworth was a respectable choice except for concerns about his civil-rights record and, especially, conflict-of-interest issues, issues similar to those that had just driven liberal Justice Abe Fortas from the Court. Carswell was an undistinguished jurist who had an even more dismal record on racial issues. Nixon did succeed with Harry Blackmun (with Burger one of the "Minnesota Twins"), Lewis Powell, and future chief justice William Rehnquist. The first two turned out to be surprisingly liberal while the respectable Rehnquist was a conservative whom Nixon once labeled a "clown."<sup>35</sup> Nixon here was referring to Rehnquist's flamboyant clothes, a sartorial preference he carried with him to the Court. Nixon's Supreme Court appointments did not nudge the Court far enough to the right for Republicans, perhaps because he misjudged Blackmun's and Powell's judicial positions. The Democratic Senate, of course, had the final word.

Nixon tried and failed to remake the Court. Trump, with a Republican Senate and the "reform" that did away with the possibility of the minority's check on nominees, has succeeded with two rock-bound conservatives, Neil Gorsuch and Brett Kavanaugh, who demonstrated his unjudicial temperament when he lashed out his in his public hearings against the Clintons and liberal Democrats. More important in the long run, Senator Mitch McConnell (R-KY), from his perch atop the Senate, pushed through close to two hundred appointments to the federal court system, many of whom were, as promised by Trump, recommended by the Federalist Society, a conservative organization. Most were young enough to be primed to serve for forty years defending originalism, corporate and religious rights, and opposing *Roe v. Wade*, in another Trump campaign promise fulfilled.

Nixon resigned in August 1974 before his certain impeachment by the House. During the fourteen months of investigations and hearings, Nixon cooperated with Congress by not contesting subpoenas issued to his aides. He did, however, contest the demand by Congress to release his tapes, which were discovered during the Senate hearings in 1973. He finally had to surrender them in toto after the Supreme Court ruled against him 8-0 on 24 July 1974. That produced the

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<sup>34</sup>Erica L. Green, "Devo's Rules Bolster Rights of Students Accused of Sexual Misconduct," *New York Times*, 7 May 2020: A34.

<sup>35</sup>Bob Woodward and Scott Armstrong, *The Brethren* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1979):161.

'smoking gun' that made his conviction in the Senate inevitable. One of the House Impeachment Committee's charges was obstruction of justice. Until the court ruling on the tapes, it was possible that enough Republicans would defend Nixon in the Senate to defeat the majority's attempt to remove him from office. Although many Republicans had spoken out against him on some issues over the period of the investigations, it was only at the last minute that most turned against him. He resigned on 9 August 1974 because he knew he would be impeached in the House and found guilty by the Senate.

Those tapes caused severe problems for him after he fired special prosecutor Archibald Cox in the "Saturday Night Massacre" on 20 October 1973. Nixon's Justice Department was not as loyal as Trump's, as his attorney general and deputy attorney general resigned rather than agree to fire Cox. His acting head of the FBI, L Patrick Gray, was more helpful when he colluded with White House counsel John Dean during the early stages of the Watergate investigation.

In the Russian investigation, almost all Republicans backed their president. In fact, the chair of the House Intelligence Committee, Devin Nunes (R-CA) worked with the White House secretly to assist Trump. When the president fired FBI chief James Comey on 9 May 2017 because of that investigation, most Republicans supported his action against the alleged chief perpetrator of the Russian "hoax." In December 2018, after having fired Jeff Sessions as Attorney General, Trump appointed William Barr to head the Justice Department. He has been more loyal than his predecessor, who had earned Trump's ire for recusing himself from the Russian investigation. When the Mueller report was sent to him in March 2018, Barr misrepresented its findings on collusion and obstruction of justice in a way that reinforced Trump's claims that it was all a hoax. Although Mueller did not find a formal conspiracy involving the campaign and Russian agents, he did make a strong case for obstruction of justice against the president.

The White House had cooperated with Robert Mueller's many requests for witnesses and documents although Trump himself had refused to testify in person. When it was discovered that Trump withheld aid from Ukraine until it promised to investigate his political rival, Joe Biden, and his son Hunter, the House began its impeachment investigation on 30 November 2019. Trump stonewalled the House, pressuring his aides to reject requests for documents and for witnesses. He seemed to have learned from the Russian investigation. Nonetheless leaks and testimony from civil servants did inform the nation about much of the scandal. Trump was impeached by Democrats in the House in a partisan vote but deemed not guilty in a partisan vote by Republicans in the Senate.

As a result of investigations by Congress and the special prosecutor, Nixon's former attorney general John Mitchell, counsel John Dean, chief of staff Bob Haldeman, domestic advisor John Ehrlichman, lawyer Herbert Kalmbach, and aides Egil Krogh and Charles Colson were among those who went to jail for charges relating to Watergate. Appointments Secretary Dwight Chapin and campaign aide Donald Segretti served terms for election-law violations in the 1972 campaign. Nixon, who, upon resigning, faced as many as ten criminal charges from special prosecutor Leon Jaworski, was pardoned by President Gerald Ford in September 1974.

Among those who pled guilty or were found guilty as a result of the Mueller investigation were Trump's national security advisor Michael Flynn, campaign manager Paul Manafort and his assistant Rick Gates, campaign aides Roger Stone and George Papadopolous, and personal lawyer Michael Cohen, among others. Trump might face charges when he leaves the presidency at the least for campaign-finance violations involving hush-money payments to two of his former lovers on the eve of the election.

On 17 November 1973 Nixon famously claimed, "I am not a crook." Aside from Watergate, he was involved in shady dealings relating to his taxes and controversial construction on his California home that had been paid for by the government. Trump certainly appeared to be a crook considering his long history of not paying contractors and his fake Trump University. As president he has been accused of self-dealing and violating the emoluments clause of the Constitution.

We know about these transactions because of leaks. Leaks are always a problem for presidents and public officials. Both Nixon and Trump, like many presidents, went to war against the media that published those leaks. Nixon, who did not have

to deal with cable-news stations or social media, paid close attention to ABC, CBS, NBC, the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *Time* and *Newsweek*. Privately, he railed against what he felt were unfair accounts, telling Haldeman in April 1972, “The discrediting of the press must be our major objective over the next few months.”<sup>36</sup> His opposition to and actions against the elite media were strong compared to other presidents but very weak compared to Trump’s. And Nixon rarely took his war to the public.

Trump, unlike Nixon, did take his war against the media to the public, beginning with his campaign. His rallies often featured attacks against journalists attending the events. He also attacked them in person, face-to-face at his formal and informal press briefings. He was especially hostile to female journalists, often those of color. The media soon became the “enemy of the people” and the purveyors of “Fake News.” His assault was central to rallying his supporters, who, over the years, had been made suspicious of the so-called elite media that misrepresented their reality. His almost daily pounding of the media produced results. In late March 2020, a national poll revealed that Americans disapproved the media’s handling of the coronavirus crisis more than they disapproved of Trump’s handling of that crisis.<sup>37</sup>

In addition, on domestic politics, despite their tough-guy images, both Nixon and Trump had difficulty firing anyone in person. In a celebrated meeting with longtime friend J. Edgar Hoover on 20 September 1971, Nixon was prepared to fire the FBI director. Hoover, sensing what was going on, turned the tables on him when he made it sound as if the president was going to retire: “Why that’s ridiculous. You’re still a young man.”<sup>38</sup> Nixon was unable to bring himself to fire the FBI chief. After forty-eight years on the job, he died still chief on 2 May 1972.

Trump, who made his fame on “The Apprentice,” with two words, “You’re fired!” also had a difficult time firing anyone in person. Instead he took to tweets and letters delivered to the official by an aide, as was the case with James Comey. Further, when Don McGahn, the White House lawyer, and others failed to follow his orders to get rid of Robert Mueller, Trump took no action against them.

Despite the many officials dismissed by his administration, Trump claimed incongruously “I learned a lot from Nixon. Don’t fire people.” He also pointed out the differences between himself and Nixon. “Number one, he may have been guilty. And number two, he had tapes all over the place. I did nothing wrong, and there are no tapes. But I wish there were tapes in my case.”<sup>39</sup>

Finally, on domestic politics, both Presidents tried to influence the outcome of the contests for the Democratic nomination for president in their respective reelection campaigns. For one thing, Nixon’s lawyer secretly funneled money to Governor George Wallace of Alabama to assist his run in the Democratic primaries or as an independent. More important, Nixon succeeded in weakening his most prominent challenger, the centrist Senator Edmund Muskie (D-ME), employing both legal and illegal “dirty tricks.” The Democrats chose Senator George McGovern (D-SD), a weaker candidate assailed by Republicans as a radical who supported ‘Acid, Abortion, and Amnesty.’ McGovern, who had a Ph.D. in history, lost all the states except for Massachusetts and the District of Columbia.

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<sup>36</sup> Small, *The Presidency of Richard Nixon*, 227.

<sup>37</sup> Peter Roff, “Holding the Liberal Media Accountable During the Covid-19 Pandemic,” *Washington Times*, 2 April 2020, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2020/apr/2/holding-the-liberal-media-accountable-during-the-c/>.

<sup>38</sup> Mark Riebling, *Wedge: The Secret War Between the FBI and the CIA* (New York: Knopf, 1994): 288.

<sup>39</sup> Aaron Rugar, “I Learned a Lot from Richard Nixon”: Trump’s latest Fox and Friends Interview Went Strange Places,” *Vox*, 8 May 2020, <https://www.vox.com/2020/5/8/21251862/trump-fox-and-friends-interview-coronavirus-jobs-reports>.

As he did in the election of 2016, Trump backed the claims of the supporters of Senator Bernie Sanders (D-VT) who contended that the nomination process was rigged against them in 2020. It remains to be seen how that will work out in the November election. In both elections, he perceived that he would have an easier time competing against the more radical candidate in the race for the Democratic nomination.

### *Foreign Policy*

It is difficult to compare Nixon and Trump on foreign policy because Trump, despite his bluster, has had few positive accomplishments, and, of course, fewer serious crises up to the coronavirus pandemic. In addition, it is too soon to evaluate Trump's ongoing policies in Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, and Israel, as well as his relations with China, Russia, and NATO and the European Union

Foreign policy was Nixon's forte. He had more experience than most Presidents, understood the international system, and generally listened to his intelligence agencies and national security advisor and later secretary of state Henry Kissinger and his very professional staff. His three greatest accomplishments from his perspective were achieving détente with the Soviet Union, traveling to China in 1972 to normalize relations, and ending U.S. participation in the Vietnam War. Knowing that Russia and China were enemies, he was able to play one against the other in a skillful bit of triangular diplomacy. He did take calculated risks at times, as when he jeopardized his grand scheme by mining Hanoi and Haiphong harbors in April 1972, just weeks away from his epochal meeting with General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev in Moscow. He was celebrated for his poker-playing prowess on a Pacific Island during World War II. In Moscow, he signed the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT) Treaty with the Russian leader at that summit, an example of a good deal of advance planning before the presidential-level meeting, something for which the spontaneous, feel-it-in-his gut Trump apparently has little patience.

On second glance, however, these three accomplishments were not all complete successes. Russian policy came undone after he left office as conservative Republicans like Ronald Reagan opposed his rapprochement with the Kremlin. The somewhat one-sided economic deals he made with China, in addition to bowing to Beijing's pressure on Taiwan, made it appear to some observers that Mao Zedong had gotten the better of him. As for Vietnam, he ended U.S. participation in 1973, after 18,000 additional American deaths and hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese deaths during his time in office, on peace terms that he most likely could have achieved in 1969 or 1970. His policy of Vietnamization, where he periodically brought home U.S. forces, made it difficult to maintain military opposition to the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong. In the interim, he brought the war to Cambodia and Laos with invasions in 1970 and 1971, respectively. The 1973 deal was followed two years later by the inevitable total Communist victory in Vietnam. It did buy him a "decent interval" before critics could blame him for losing Vietnam during his reelection campaign.<sup>40</sup> It appears that Trump is playing his own decent-interval card as he considers withdrawing all American troops from Afghanistan before the 2020 election, even though his aides contend that such a withdrawal would lead to a Taliban victory—but not until after the election.<sup>41</sup>

Although Nixon practiced realpolitik, he never jettisoned rhetoric supporting Democratic ideals. They mean little to the transactionalist Trump who has befriended dictators like Russia's Vladimir Putin, the Philippines's Rodrigo Duterte, Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and Saudi Arabia's Mohammad Bin Salmon, whose murder of a Saudi Arabian journalist based in the United States horrified most of the world. But that death was not as important to Trump as Middle Eastern oil and politics. He knew what dictators had done to their own countries yet he could joke that Egyptian President Abdel

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<sup>40</sup> Jeffrey Kimball, *The Vietnam War Files* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004): Chapter 5.

<sup>41</sup> Thomas Gibbons-Neff and Julian E. Barnes, "Trump Wants Troops in Afghanistan Home by Election Day: The Pentagon is Drawing up Plans," *New York Times*, 27 May 2020: A15.

Fattah el-Sisi was “my favorite dictator.”<sup>42</sup> It seems he admires dictators who can do whatever they want, unencumbered by courts, parliaments, and constitutions. All presidents wish they had the power to do whatever they wanted, but none attempted to carry out their dreams, except Trump, who, on 13 April 2020 announced that he had “absolute authority” over governors and states.<sup>43</sup>

Unlike previous presidents, Trump met twice with the dictator of North Korea. The meetings themselves were cherished victories for international pariah Kim Jong-un who, to date, has not come close to offering any serious concessions on nuclear weapons. Trump, however, claimed a victory by repeating many times the falsehood that Obama was rejected by Kim when the former president wanted to meet with him.<sup>44</sup>

Nixon did not try to destroy America’s leadership in the international system, but worked within it. The Nixon Doctrine, announced on 25 July 1969, reflecting his Vietnamization policy, suggested that in the future the United States would be an ally of last resort, calling upon friendly nations to shoulder more of their defense burdens. This policy led to increasing reliance on regional powers like Iran to defend the West’s strategic interests in their areas. Between 1972 and 1977, the Shah purchased more arms from the United States than anyone had before, up to 40 percent of his national budget. With so many resources going to arms purchases, he neglected crucial domestic spending, which might have prevented the revolution of 1979 and the establishment of the adversarial Islamic Republic of Iran, with whom future presidents, including Trump, had to deal.

In fact, in terms of Iran, Trump took the most important military action to date during his term in office, the assassination on the soil of a third country of General Qasem Soleimani, the leader of Iran’s Revolutionary Guard, on 3 January 2020. This risky and controversial act, which followed attacks by Iranian-backed militias on American forces in Iraq, did not escalate much beyond the assassination. Here, in an application of Nixon’s legendary “Madman Theory,” perhaps, for the first time Trump’s threats and bluster apparently worked.

More than any other president since the isolationist twenties, Trump promoted his America First program, pulling out of the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action treaty on Iran, the 2015 Paris Agreement on Climate Change, the 2016 Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement, the 2002 Open Skies Treaty, and threatening to pull out of NATO, arms-control treaties, and the World Health Organization. When it came to American forces around the globe, he played down their relationship to overall American national security and talked frequently about how the nations the United States had been protecting for more than six decades should pay more for their protection.

Not as guileful as Nixon, and far more narcissistic, he easily succumbed to praise from his ‘good friends’ internationally, some of whom made fun of him in public. The entire world viewed on television or the internet French president Emmanuel Macron, Canadian prime minister Justin Trudeau, British prime minister Boris Johnson, and Dutch prime minister Mark Rutte laughing at him behind his back at a NATO summit in December 2019.<sup>45</sup> Trump also earned derision

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<sup>42</sup> Summer Eldemire, “Trump asked for ‘My Favorite Dictator,’ Egyptian President Sisi, at the G-7 Summit: Report,” *The Daily Beast*, 13 September, 2019, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/trump-asked-for-my-favorite-dictator-egyptian-president-sisi-at-g7-summit-report>.

<sup>43</sup> “President Trump Falsely Claims he has ‘Total Authority over the States,” *YouTube*, 13 April 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QdZ1weIkaX0>.

<sup>44</sup> Daniel Dale, “Fact Check: Obama Never ‘Begged’ for a military meeting with Kim Jong Un,” *CNN*, 1 July 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/07/01/politics/fact-check-obama-never-begged-to-meet-with-kim-jong-un/index.html>.

<sup>45</sup> Chris Cillizza, “Why World Leaders Seemingly Joking about Donald Trump Will Drive the President Crazy,” *CNN.com*, 4 December 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/12/04/politics/trump-macron-trudeau-boris-johnson/index.html>.

from his allies when he pushed past the prime minister of tiny Montenegro to get to the front row at a photo shoot at an earlier NATO summit.<sup>46</sup> On the other hand, he received enough respect and adulation from Russian president Vladimir Putin at the Helsinki Summit that he accepted the dictator's denial of involvement in the 2016 campaign, even though that was the firm conclusion of his own intelligence services.<sup>47</sup>

In Latin America, in 1970, Nixon's CIA failed to stop Salvador Allende, a socialist, from becoming president of Chile. When he was overthrown three years later, the Agency had a hand in supporting those who carried out the coup. He did appear more neutral than his predecessors in the Middle East, helping to end the 1973 Yom Kippur War, in which Henry Kissinger earned the trust of Egypt and Syria. Nixon and Kissinger were not averse to seeing the Israelis bloodied a bit during the early days of the war in order to advance a peace agreement.

Nixon also secretly supported Pakistan in its 1971 war with India, while proclaiming neutrality. Most Americans were horrified by the atrocities committed by Pakistani troops in what was to become Bangladesh. Here, perhaps as with Trump's highly personal diplomacy, Nixon might have been affected by his strong dislike for Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi.

Trump has his own Allende. One dictator he does not like is Nicolas Maduro of Venezuela, whom he has tried to depose with economic and political pressure. Trump also opposes the dictatorship in Cuba, whose chilly relations with the United States had been warmed up a bit by Obama. Unlike Nixon, Trump adopted the most pro-Israeli policy of any recent president, cutting aid to the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), moving the U.S. embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, and promoting his inexperienced son-in-law's peace plan that did not offer a two-state resolution. Nixon, as noted above, worked with his son-in-law David on baseball all-star teams.

Trump did pull some troops out of Syria, fulfilling another promise to bring home as many troops as possible from battlegrounds in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan, as well as from military bases around the world. But his sudden pull-out from Syria allowed Turkey to invade the area vacated by American troops and rout the Kurds, the United States' most loyal allies in the region.<sup>48</sup> In a comparable case, Nixon withdrew his support of the Kurds in 1975 after an Iraqi-Iranian peace agreement, with Henry Kissinger explaining, "covert action should not be confused with missionary work."<sup>49</sup>

Trump was more successful with his Mexican policies, threatening Mexican president Andre Manuel Lopez Obrador with tariffs in order to gain his cooperation in helping to reduce the numbers of asylum seekers from entering the United States.<sup>50</sup> Further, using a controversial national emergency declaration to divert funds from the Defense Department to build a

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<sup>46</sup> "Watch President Push a Prime Minister Aside," *CNN.com*, 25 April 2017, <https://www.cnn.com/videos/politics/2017/05/25/trump-shove-prime-minister-montenegro-nato-orig-vstop-dlewis.cnn>.

<sup>47</sup> "Trump Sides with Russia Against FBI at Helsinki Summit," *BBC.com*, 16 July 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-44852812>.

<sup>48</sup> Luke Mogelson, "Kurds Abandoned," *New Yorker*, 27 April 2020, 32-45.

<sup>49</sup> Walter Isaacson, *Kissinger: A Biography* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 564.

<sup>50</sup> James Frederick, "How Trump Beefs Up Immigration Enforcement to Meet Trump's Terms," *NPR*, 13 July 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/07/13/740009105/how-mexico-beefs-up-immigration-enforcement-to-meet-trumps-terms>.

southern border wall, funds that Congress refused to give him, he claims to have completed 160 miles of new wall on the Mexican border. There is no indication that Mexico will pay for the wall as he had promised.<sup>51</sup>

Finally, both presidents had little interest in or regard for Africa. Nixon instructed Kissinger “to leave the niggers to Bill [Secretary of State William Rogers] and we’ll take care of the rest of the world.”<sup>52</sup> In January 2018, Trump referred to “shithole” countries in the Caribbean and Africa.<sup>53</sup>

### *Conclusion*

Before I summarize this comparison, we should be aware of Richard Nixon’s admonition about history, one that might be supported by Donald Trump. Nixon wrote, “History will treat me fairly. Historians probably won’t because most historians are on the left.”<sup>54</sup> When he left the presidency, Nixon appeared at the bottom or near the bottom of most historians’ polls of presidents. But he made a slow comeback to where he ranked 28<sup>th</sup> in a recent poll.<sup>55</sup> Without Watergate, he most likely would have scored even higher. In polls of presidents that ranked the incomplete presidency of Donald Trump, the 45<sup>th</sup> president came in dead last or very close to the bottom, a result that caused the few James Buchanan fans to celebrate.<sup>56</sup> In addition, in a recent poll of three hundred presidential scholars sponsored by the American Political Science Association, Nixon came in 26<sup>th</sup> in terms of divisive presidents and Trump finished dead last as the most divisive president.<sup>57</sup> Whatever the polls say, more than most presidents, Trump has made good on many of his campaign pledges from deregulation, tax cuts, and judicial appointments to rejecting international agreements signed by his predecessor.

Comparing a presidency that ended forty-six years ago to one now in its fortieth month is certainly unfair to Trump since it will be a while before we know how this all turns out. Undoubtedly, he will be judged in good measure by his handling of the major crisis of his administration, the COVID-19 pandemic, just as Nixon has been judged in good measure by Watergate and its associated crimes. Nevertheless, these two men, who came from such different backgrounds, share personality traits and commonalities in their political campaigning and domestic politics. It is clear from today’s vantage point, however, that there are many more dramatic differences between the two leaders in terms of presidential demeanor, understanding of the American political system, approach to governing, and foreign relations. Nixon’s administration

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<sup>51</sup> Chantal Da Silva, “Trump Administration Has Built Dozens of Miles of Border Wall Since Coronavirus Outbreak,” *Newsweek*, 30 March 2020, <https://www.newsweek.com/trump-administration-has-built-dozens-miles-border-wall-since-coronavirus-outbreak-began-1495094>.

<sup>52</sup> Roger Morris, *Uncertain Greatness: Henry Kissinger and American Foreign Policy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 131. See also, Kenneth O’Reilly, *Nixon’s Piano: Presidents and Racial Politics from Washington to Clinton* (New York: Free Press, 1995), 292.

<sup>53</sup> Eli Watkins and Abbey Phillip, “Trump Decries Immigrants from ‘Shithole’ Countries Coming to the US” *CNN.com*, 12 January 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/01/11/politics/immigrants-shithole-countries-trump/index.html>.

<sup>54</sup> Richard M. Nixon, *In the Arena: A Memoir of Victory, Defeat, and Renewal* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1990), :75.

<sup>55</sup> C-Span, *Presidential Historians’ Survey, 2017*, <https://www.c-span.org/presidentsurvey2017/>.

<sup>56</sup> William Cummings, “Survey of Scholars Places Trump the Third Worst President of All Time,” *USA Today*, 13 February, 2019, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/onpolitics/2019/02/13/siena-presidential-ranking-survey/2857075002/>; Matthew Cummings, “Trump Comes in Last in Experts Presidential Rankings Survey,” *Politico*, 9 February 2018, <https://www.politico.com/story/2018/02/19/presidential-rankings-survey-trump-417103>.

<sup>57</sup> “The Most Divisive U.S. Presented, Ranked by Political Scientists,” *CBS News*, 21 May 2020, <https://www.cbsnews.com/pictures/us-presidents-most-divisive-polarizing/>.



produced far more significant legislation and international breakthroughs than Trump's has, so far. And that evaluation is coming from one of those liberal historians Nixon worried about. On the other hand, in terms of his incredible and unprecedented revolutionary approach to the presidency, to Congress, to allies, and to the public, Trump will prove to be one of the most consequential presidents in American history.

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