

36 Nixon: Vietnam, China, and Watergate



The Nixons in Yorba Linda, California, where Richard (*far right*) was born in 1913. When he was nine, they moved to Whittier, where Richard's father ran a gas station and a grocery store.

Some years, like some people, stand out. Take 1492, or 1776, or 1860, or 1917, or 1945. You know what happened in each of those years, don't you? Well, find out if you don't, because each is noteworthy, significant, momentous, and consequential—which means they are not-to-be-forgotten years.

Now, 1968 doesn't rank up there with 1492—it wasn't *that* important. But, in the second half of the 20th century, it stood out as a pivotal year. And that means that things changed in 1968; they changed dramatically.

It was the year of those two awful assassinations. It was the year of the Tet offensive in Vietnam. *Tet* is the Vietnamese New Year. It is a big holiday—a kind of Christmas, New Year's, and Thanksgiving rolled into one. The North Vietnamese launched an attack during Tet;

a lot of American soldiers were killed, and we realized we weren't winning that war (although our leaders had been telling us that we were).

Nineteen sixty-eight was also a year of urban riots and protests on college campuses. It was the year a computer named Hal starred in the movie *2001: A Space Odyssey*, and people gasped when they considered where technology might lead. It was an election year, and the end of a liberal era and the beginning of more conservative times. It was the year Republican Richard Milhous Nixon was elected president.

During the Cold War years the presidents and the military kept many decisions from the American people. All kinds of things were called "top secret." Today we know that many of those "top secrets" were mistakes. In a democracy, the people should have the freedom to make their own mistakes—and learn from them. Democracy is based on an open government and an informed public.

I have never thought much of the notion that the presidency makes a man presidential. What has given the American presidency its vitality is that each man remains distinctive. His abilities become more obvious, and his faults become more glaring. The presidency is not a finishing school. It is a magnifying glass.

—RICHARD NIXON, *MEMOIRS*

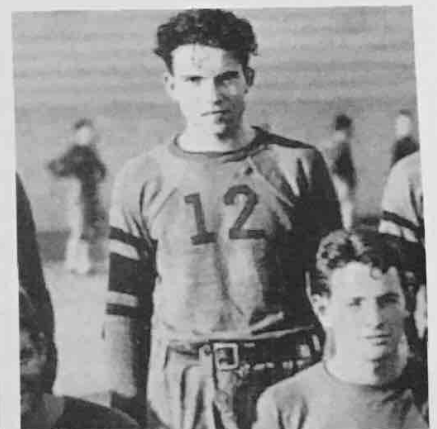
In 1962, Nixon lost the race for governor of California and told reporters, "You won't have Nixon to kick around anymore, gentlemen, because this is my last press conference." Six years later he ran for the presidency and won easily.

Nixon's story begins way back in the 18th century, when a family named Milhous arrived in William Penn's colony. They'd come from Ireland and were Quakers: hardworking, peace-loving folk. Eventually the Milhouses moved to Indiana, where there were also many Quakers, and, after that, some of them went to California and helped found a Quaker town named Whittier (named after a 19th-century American poet. Who was—?). When the 20th century began, Frank Milhous was running a nursery (the kind where you raise plants, not children) in Whittier. He was prosperous and said to be a bit snooty. He wasn't at all impressed with Frank Nixon, the man his daughter Hannah chose to wed.

The Nixons, too, had come to America in the 18th century. They first settled in Delaware, about 10 miles away from the Milhouses, across the border in Pennsylvania. But they probably didn't know each other.

Life was never easy for the Nixons. It certainly wasn't easy for Frank Nixon, who became an orphan when he was young and never got much love. People had mixed feelings about Frank Nixon: he could be thoughtful and kind, but he had a bad temper. Everyone agreed that Hannah was kindly; some called her a saint. Frank and Hannah had five sons and struggled to get by on Frank's modest earnings.

Their second son, Richard, a quiet, dark-eyed, serious boy, was the kind who never seemed to get his clothes dirty. Richard got good grades in school; in high school he learned to debate and to act. Then he went to Whittier College, was president of the student



Richard Nixon played football in high school, but not in college. One observer said, "I've often thought with Nixon that if he'd made the football team, his life would have been different."

Words that Richard Nixon never learned:

When tempted to do anything in secret, ask yourself if you would do it in public; if you would not do it, be sure it is wrong.

—THOMAS JEFFERSON

Nixon went to China in 1972. Here are his words describing what happened: Chou En-lai stood at the foot of the ramp, hatless in the cold. Even a heavy overcoat did not hide the thinness of his frail body....I knew that Chou had been deeply insulted by Foster Dulles's refusal to shake hands with him at the Geneva Conference in 1954. When I reached the bottom step, therefore, I made a point of extending my hand as I walked toward him. When our hands met, one era ended and another began.

In 1971, the 26th Amendment to the Constitution was ratified. It said that 18-year-olds could vote. Are you getting ready? The most important job in the nation is that of citizen. This is a people's government. The people are in charge. The president, the governors, and the other public officials all work for us citizens. They are called *servants of the people*. But if you don't know enough about your government to understand what your servants are doing, they may rob you and steal your power.



This boy was a soldier in the Cambodian army. U.S. policy in Cambodia ended in disaster for the people, whether they were communists or not.

council, and got a scholarship to Duke University Law School (across the country in North Carolina). He was graduated in time to serve in the U.S. Navy during World War II.

It was politics that always seemed to interest him. So, as a young lawyer, when he got chances to run for Congress and then for the Senate, he grabbed them. Some people would never forget the campaign methods he used. They were unsavory—which means “dirty.” For one thing, he accused some of his opponents of being communists, when he knew they weren't. He ran against a woman senator and said she was pink right down to her underwear—because *red* and *pink* were words used to describe communists. That might have been amusing, but it was untrue. Someone on his campaign staff even forged a picture of the lady senator with a leading communist. Everyone was doing it, his supporters said of his mud-slinging and dirty tricks. Do you think that excused him?

No question, Dick Nixon was bright and capable. In Congress he became known as a tough anti-communist, a kind of well-behaved Joe McCarthy. On most other issues, he sided with the moderates. As to civil rights, he was usually for them; in foreign affairs, he supported the Marshall Plan. He impressed people: he was smart, industrious, serious, and ambitious. Dwight D. Eisenhower asked him to be his vice president, and he did a good job in that office. People began talking about the two Nixons. One was very capable. The other Nixon didn't seem to care about truth and honor.

When he became president, he brought those two personalities with him. Richard Nixon the statesman talked of “law and order,” and, after months of riots in our cities, that was just what most Americans wanted to hear. But the other Richard Nixon had no respect for the law when it affected him.

He claimed he had a plan to end the war, but he never said what that plan was. Then he kept us fighting in Vietnam for almost five more years (he was re-elected in 1972). He took the war into neighboring Cambodia and Laos, without telling Congress that he planned to do it. He dropped more bombs than any president in our history, although he said he wanted

to be a peacemaker. The anti-war demonstrations had been bad when Lyndon Johnson was president; they were worse for President Nixon.

Nixon's intelligent, reasonable side helped him lead the nation in a new foreign-policy direction. Nixon was a pragmatist, which means a "practical thinker," and he understood that the world was changing and that it was time to try to work with the communist nations. So he went to China (and took along three cargo planes, with 50 tons of television equipment, so the whole world could watch him walk China's Great Wall). He improved relations with that enormous nation. Then he went to Moscow (Russia's capital), the first American president to do so, and once again showed concern for world harmony.

We got out of Vietnam much as we had gotten in—one step at a time. It was called "phased withdrawal." But, after Saigon, the capital of South Vietnam, fell to northern forces, we finally withdrew completely. We had lost a war—although we didn't quite admit it. We were confused and humbled and weary. We needed to feel good about ourselves again, but something was going on at home that left us even more upset and dismayed. The problem, again, was one of leadership.

Something happened to Richard Nixon that is important for you to understand. It happened because of that distrustful side of his nature. He imagined enemies. He did what he wanted, and didn't

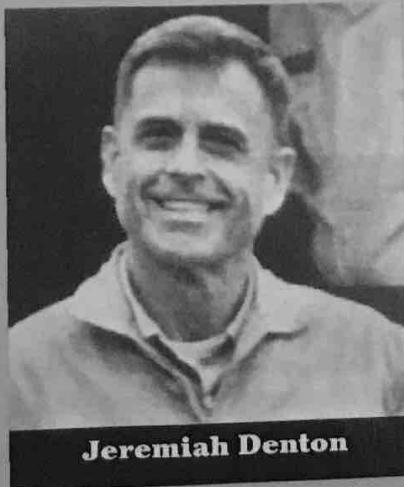


Richard and Pat Nixon atop the Great Wall of China. Nixon "recognized" China. He instituted diplomatic relations with its communist government. Asked for his thoughts on the wall, the president said, "I think you would have to conclude that this is a great wall."

Captain Denton Comes Home

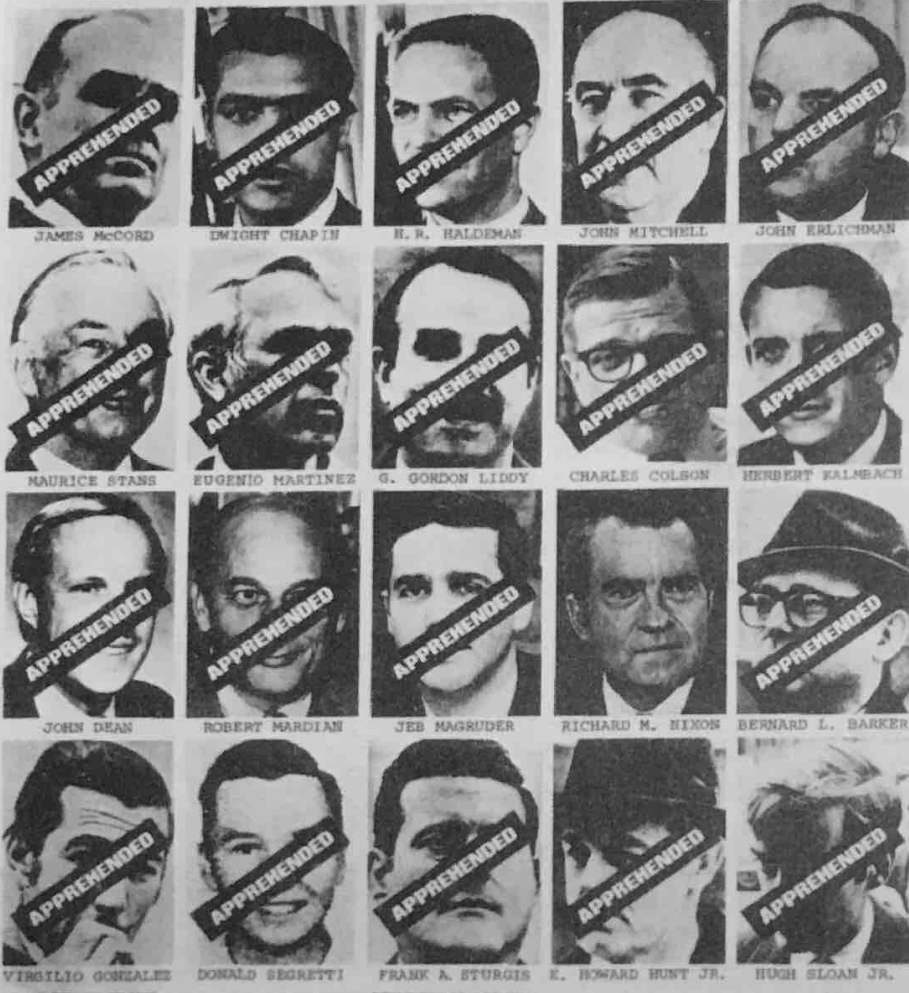
Jeremiah Denton was the 13th American pilot to be shot down in the Vietnam War. That was back in 1965 (see page 131). Now it was seven years later, and a big C141 plane touched down at Gia Lam airport, outside Hanoi. The POWs were leaving the Hanoi Hilton, and Heartbreak, and Alcatraz. They were going home. (Some 50,000 Americans who had been in southeast Asia would not return home with them.) These men had endured great hardship and had survived. They didn't know it yet, but they were national heroes. (One of them, John McCain, would

become Arizona's senator and a spokesman for political change.) They flew east, to Clark Field in the Philippines. Jeremiah Denton—now Captain Denton—on the first plane to land was asked to speak. He stood straight and spoke clearly:



We are honored to have had the opportunity to serve our country under difficult circumstances. We are profoundly grateful to our commander in chief and to our nation for this day. God bless America!
They were words that made Americans proud.

WANTED



“This office is a sacred trust,” said Nixon in 1973, the year he and dozens of others were investigated in connection with the Watergate break-in.

It was after Tet that American public opinion changed. After Tet, most Americans no longer supported the war.

worry about breaking the law, or about hurting people. He seemed to think that because he was president, he was above the law. But he was missing the whole point of American democracy. No one is above the law—not even the president. As North Carolina’s Senator Sam Ervin, Jr., said, “divine right went out with the American Revolution.”

Anyone who understands our democracy knows that the president is a servant of the people. Richard Nixon forgot that. He allowed his staff to play dirty, illegal tricks on his opponents. Burglars broke into Democratic Party headquarters and stole documents. Burglars broke into a psychiatrist’s office and stole the confidential records of someone Nixon disliked. People tapped telephone lines and listened to private conversations. Money was gathered and used in illegal ways. Lies were told about people

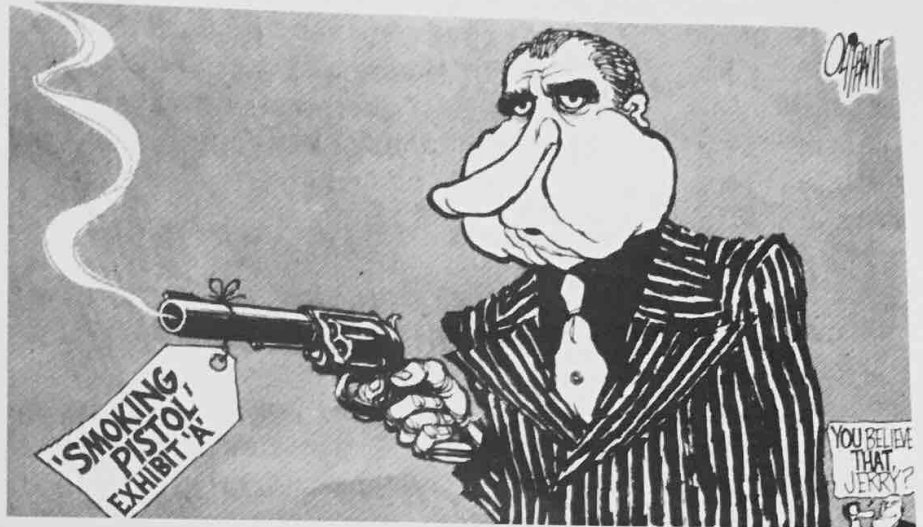
Nixon disliked. The government’s tax office was used against his enemies. All of those things were against the law.

When some of that wrongdoing became known, people in the Nixon White House did something even worse. They paid hush money to keep some people quiet and to have others lie in sworn testimony to judges and juries. It was disgraceful. It was the bottom moment in the history of the presidency. It was called “Watergate” because the Democratic Party headquarters were in Washington’s fancy Watergate apartments. Nixon’s dirty-tricks workers burglarized those Watergate headquarters. They rented a room in a nearby hotel so they could spy on Watergate. (Americans spying on each other? The president involved! Sad but true.)

Shameful as it was, there was something positive about Watergate: our democratic system worked. When two reporters (Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein) found out about the burglaries and the dirty tricks, they told of them. It took great courage to accuse a president

and his aides. Their newspaper, the *Washington Post*, stood behind them. The press—the *fourth estate*—acted as it was meant to: as a responsible watchdog alerting the nation to danger.

Richard Nixon almost got away with criminal acts—but he didn't. The president was not above the law. Nor were other people in his administration. Vice President Spiro Agnew admitted to filing a "false and fraudulent" tax return. Agnew left office, was fined \$10,000, and sentenced to three years' probation. Fifty-six men in the Nixon administration were convicted of Watergate-related crimes. Some went to jail. The Constitution writers had prepared



"I am not a crook," Nixon told reporters. His biographer Stephen Ambrose said of him, "Mr. Nixon wanted to become Richard the Great. He wanted nothing short of world peace and a prosperous, happy America. He was brought down by his own hubris, by his own actions, by his own character. This is tragedy." Below: By October 1973, Nixon's approval rating had hit a low of 17 percent. Ten months later, Republican senator Barry Goldwater informed him that he had lost almost all support in the Senate; Nixon resigned the next day.

The story continues on page 178.



Mercury, Gemini, and Apollo

Some 4 billion years ago, a small planet hurtled onto Earth and sent exploding pieces into the atmosphere. Those objects circled the earth, collided, collected, and became the moon. The earth and the moon eventually settled into a gravitational balance about 239,000 miles apart, with the moon orbiting Earth and its pull influencing the oceans' tides.

It was a long time before earthlings appeared; when they did, they watched the moon and the cycles of its appearance, and planted crops when the moon seemed to tell them to do it. They told stories of the moon, and dreamed by its bright, reflected light. So it was not surprising, when we actually pushed ourselves off the surface of the earth, that the moon was where we wanted to go.

It was an outrageous idea, to expect to leave the earth's atmosphere and make it to that distant globe, especially in the very century that people had first learned to fly.

We might not have tried it at all if it hadn't been for Russia. When the Russians sent a vehicle into space—called *Sputnik*—we couldn't quite believe it. We Americans had the idea that we were better than others. It was a kind of national arrogance. We aren't better or smarter than other people. (What we have is a terrific idea—for free government—that is the envy of a lot of other nations and has helped most of us pursue happiness.)

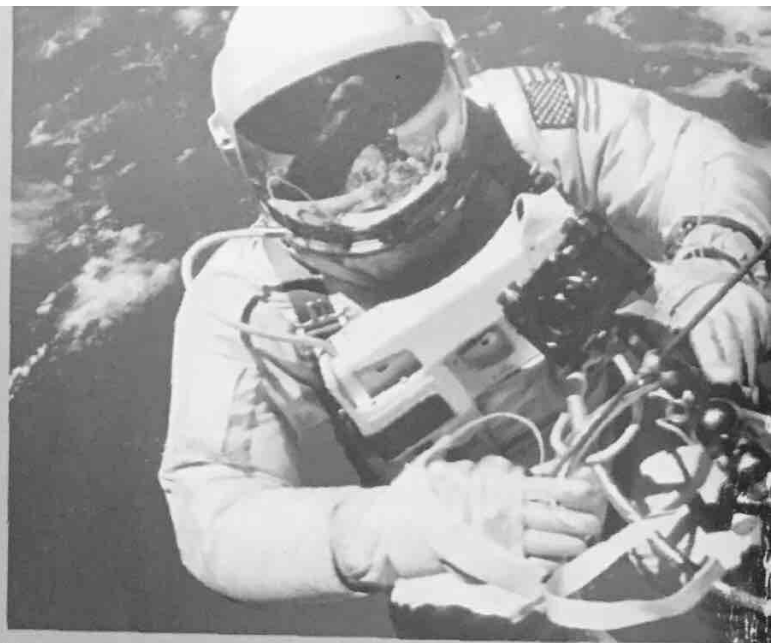
But scientific achievement? We have to work as hard as anyone else to make and do things. Russia's *Sputnik* got us energized. We didn't want our communist foes to take over space.

Then, in April 1961, the Russians sent a man rocketing into space. His name was Yuri Gagarin (guh-GAR-in), and he had a boyish grin and a lot of courage. When he came back to earth he landed in a field where he startled a cow and two farm workers. "Have you come from outer space?" stammered Anya Takhtarova to the man in the orange flight suit. "Yes. Would you believe it, I certainly have," said cosmonaut Gagarin.

The United States had a space agency, NASA (the National Aeronautics and Space Administration), and a space program—but we were behind the Russians, and we couldn't stand that idea.

President John F. Kennedy made a speech announcing our intention to put a man on the moon "before the decade is out." We were off on a space race.

What would life be like in space? On the earth, it is the pull of gravity that keeps your legs on the ground. But when there is zero gravity—as in space—there is no pull. You float around. You have no weight. If you eat a cookie in space, the crumbs float. If you want to sleep in a bed, you have to be strapped down. Other things have to be considered. Normal breathing is im-



Edward H. White II floats in space in a specially designed spacesuit and helmet, which has a gold-plated visor to protect him against the sun's rays. In his hand is an HSMU (a "hand-held self-maneuvering unit") with which he controls his movements in space.

possible in the vacuum of space; a spacecraft or spacesuit has to be equipped with its own atmosphere.

A trip to the moon would be a voyage like the one that Columbus made. No one knew where it might lead. Would we create colonies in space? Would we mine the moon's resources? Would we put factories in space and return the earth to its gardenlike heritage? Would we explore other galaxies? Would we meet other beings out there?

This moon trip became the will of a nation. It took the talent of thousands of brains, it took the lives of some astronauts (who were killed in explosive misfires), and it cost \$25.5 billion, which came from the earnings of America's citizens.

The first step toward the moon was a flight into space. Alan B. Shepard was squeezed into a spacesuit in a space capsule just big enough to hold him. This was the Mercury project, named for the swift messenger of the ancient Roman gods. (The craft was called *Freedom 7*).

Some smart scientific brains worked on Project Mercury, but they forgot something important: astronauts have to go to the bathroom. Shepard had a big breakfast the day of his flight. Finally, he had to go in his spacesuit. Then he was off, blasted into space with a great roar and arched back to his home on earth with a mighty splash into the ocean. The flight lasted 15 minutes. (Today's space shuttles have toilets. Flowing air substitutes for gravity and draws wastes into storage containers. Astronauts now wear everyday clothing inside the space vehicle. Spacesuits are needed only for activities outside the spaceship.)

The Mercury flights—there were six of them—were an important first step. One Mercury flight lasted 34 hours.

Next came *Gemini*, named for twin stars. They

Spurred by Sputnik

The fate of empires depends on the education of youth. ARISTOTLE

Sputnik was a shock. It made us feel that we were falling behind Russia when it came to technology and science. It made us look hard at our schools. In 1958 Congress passed the National Defense Education Act to give federal aid to schools to increase instruction in science and math.

for this kind of emergency by giving Congress the power to impeach and try a president. (See book 7 of *A History of US* to read of the impeachment of Andrew Johnson.)

In the House of Representatives, articles of impeachment were prepared. President Nixon was charged with lying, obstructing justice, and using the Internal Revenue Service (the tax office) and other government agencies illegally. Nixon was going to be impeached. After that, he would face a trial in the Senate for "high crimes and misdemeanors." He chose to leave the presidency instead. He resigned as president of the United States (the only man ever to do so).

In England, an editor of the London *Spectator* wrote that the U.S. presidency had gone from George Washington, who could not tell a lie, to Richard Nixon, who could not tell the truth.

Barbara Jordan Examines the Constitution

Representative Jordan, a lawyer, and the first black woman elected to the Texas State Senate, was a member of the House Judiciary Committee that considered the impeachment of President Nixon for "high crimes and misdemeanors" (see Article II, Section 4, and Article I, Sections 2 and 3, of the U.S. Constitution). Here is an excerpt from her impassioned speech, which was carried on national television and earned her the role of keynote speaker at the 1976 Democratic National Convention.

Mr. Chairman...Earlier today we heard the beginning of the Preamble to the Constitution of the United States, "We, the people." It is a very eloquent beginning. But when the document was completed, on the 17th of September in 1787, I was not included in that "We, the people." I felt somehow for many years that George Washington and Alexander Hamilton just left me out by mistake. But through the process of amendment, interpretation, and court decision I have finally been included in "We, the people."

Today, I am an inquisitor....My faith in the Constitution is whole, it is complete, it is total. I am not going to sit here and be an idle spectator to the diminution, the subversion, the destruction of the Constitution.

"Who can so properly be the inquisitors for the na-

tion as the representatives of the nation themselves?" (*The Federalist*, no. 65). The subject of its jurisdiction are those offenses which proceed from the misconduct of public men. That is what we are talking about...It is wrong...to assert that for a member to vote for an article of impeachment means that that member must be convinced that the president should be removed from office. The Constitution doesn't say that...In establishing the division between the two branches of the legislature, the House and the Senate, assigning to the one the right to accuse and to the other the right to judge, the framers of this Constitution were very astute. They did not make the accusers and the judges the same person.

What is Barbara Jordan's point? Can you put her thoughts in your own words? What do these words mean: inquisitor, diminution, subversion, astute?



"If you're going to play the game [of politics] properly," said Barbara Jordan, "you'd better know every rule."