

BOOK REVIEW: *The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (New York, 1978)

Memoirs often tend to be hagiographies. Richard Nixon's *Memoirs* do not fall into that category. His 1,090 page account of his life up until his final day in the White House is a compelling read and a necessary counter to the malevolent and vitriolic campaign against his character and his family which destroyed his presidency.

While the Establishment media and academia has made, in an unqualified way, the term "Watergate" synonymous with the Nixon presidency, Nixon's *Memoirs* provide copious insights on his career and achievements that have been deliberately ignored and neglected by those set on disseminating disparagement dressed up as objectivity.

Nixon's years as Vice President show him to have been the most active and involved of any incumbent of that office in US history. The knowledge and experience he gained in foreign affairs gave him a proficiency in that field which remains unrivalled to this day. His grasp on the mendacity and guile of the communists and his appreciation of the importance of demonstrating US strength, provide a completely different context to the course of events in South East Asia as told by the Establishment media and its fellow travellers.

Whereas the purveyors of the Watergate Nixon ignore at worst and gloss over at best the domestic policies of his Administration, Nixon's *Memoirs* deal in great detail with the many domestic policies he put forward. A quote from page 979 provides an outline of the issues: "The cities were now quiet, the college campuses had once again become seats of learning; the rise in crime had been checked; the drug problem had been massively attacked, the draft had been eliminated. We had submitted to Congress the nation's first environmental program as well as major plans for national health care, education's reform, revenue-sharing and government reorganisation." He abolished or reduced Johnson's Great Society programs which had caused bureaucracy and expenditure to balloon whilst delivering little by way of social alleviation. He introduced changes in local government that were the first in forty years. He called his reforms the New American Revolution. As he put it, he was determined to "break the Eastern stranglehold on the executive branch and federal government" and to promote the appointment of women and representatives of minority ethnic groups within public life (pp. 766-769). But in attempting such innovations, he faced a Congress and a Senate that were controlled by the Democratic Party and thus were either opposed or indifferent to his policies.

Nixon's personal contact and relations with the leaders of Red China and with Brezhnev of the USSR are recounted in fascinating detail along with the tedious diplomatic manoeuvring which characterised *Détente*. Whilst unstinting in his appreciation of the role of Henry Kissinger, it is clear that Nixon's overarching perspective on world affairs played a pivotal role in the shaping and unfolding of US relations with the two communist giants.

As important and pertinent as Nixon's career is before the cumulative effects of Watergate, he devotes a third of his *Memoirs* to the final two years of his presidency. Referring to Watergate, he wrote: "I have sometimes wondered if we had spent more time on the problem at the outset, we might have handled it less stupidly" (p. 646). Such wistful and candid remarks, nonetheless, do not detract from the highly detailed, diarised, almost day-to-day account of the unravelling of events which ended his presidency. The chapters headed 1973 and 1974 – comprising more than 300 pages – provide an inside track on the vendetta waged by the media and the Democratic Party not only against the Nixon Administration, but against Nixon's family, friends and Nixon himself. What pervades those pages is the unrelenting barrage of accusations, falsehoods and vitriol which they endured. Never before had an Administration been subjected to such reproach and hatred. What made it all the more difficult to bear was the utter hypocrisy of the invective. For example, the legally justifiable wire-taps of the Administration were condemned as violations of privacy. Yet Robert Kennedy had authorised widespread wire-taps without warrants which included bugging the phones and rooms of Martin Luther King. But as with issues concerning taxes, the installation of security measures on private properties and campaign funding, the accusers applied double standards. Prior violations by the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations were ignored. Yet within that pejorative maelstrom, the Executive arm of the US government continued to function – right down to Nixon's last full day in office when he signed a veto statement against an agricultural appropriations bill (p.1,078). In reaching his decision to resign the presidency, Nixon's main concern was that the Executive arm of government would be hamstrung for months on end if he elected to face an impeachment trial.

What is most shameful about the years 1973 and 1974 is not the fact that Nixon was heard on the tape of 23 June 1972 discussing the possibility of the CIA obstructing the FBI from pursuing the investigation of the break-in at the Democratic Party's Watergate office. That conversation was hailed as the "smoking gun" which, Nixon's accusers claimed, rendered him guilty of obstruction of justice. As Nixon stated in his book *In the Arena* (p. 31), his remark was made within the context of his concern that because some former CIA operatives had participated in the break-in, FBI involvement might prejudice other legitimate CIA operations. In their eager quest to condemn Nixon, his accusers ignored the fact that on 12 July 1972, Nixon instructed FBI head Patrick Gray to go ahead with the investigation. *Thus, no obstruction of justice took place as a result of that snatch of conversation of 23 June 1972.*

The most shameful aspect was the role of the media and the hypocrisy of the Democratic Party. In his time George Washington described the conduct of elements of the press as "outrages on common decency." Following a particularly vitriolic assault on him by a Philadelphia newspaper in March 1797, Washington deplored the paper for indulging in "the most wilful, artful and malignant representations that can be imagined [which were meant] to weaken, if not destroy the confidence of the public." Washington's diagnosis applies precisely to what Nixon experienced and to the damage

the Executive arm of government suffered as a result of the over-reach of the Congress, assisted by liberal elements in the Judiciary in wilfully eroding the right of the Executive to confidentiality by their on-going demands for documents and tapes that had nothing to do with the singular issue of the Watergate break-in. Of particular disgrace was the conduct of the House Judiciary Committee which was compiling charges of impeachment. On 27 June 1974, before a single witness had been heard or defence made, its chairman, Peter Rodino, announced that all 21 Democrats on the Committee would be voting to impeach Nixon. From that one sees the extent to which the pursuit of political ends had superseded the pursuit of justice. For all their smug, sanctimonious posturing, the so-called liberals of the Democratic Party harboured the same instincts as those who conduct kangaroo courts.

Woven into Nixon's personal account are several hand-written copies of notes and letters from his two daughters, Tricia and Julie. Anecdotal in character, they provide insight not only to the emotional stresses to which the Nixon family were subjected, but to the fortitude and political stamina of Nixon's daughters. The same has to be said of his two sons-in-law, Ed Cox and David Eisenhower.

Section 4 of Article Two of the US Constitution states that a president may be removed from office "on impeachment for and conviction of treason, bribery or other high crimes and misdemeanours." As Nixon stated in *In the Arena*, "No one ripped off the government, as was the case in previous scandals. Wrongdoing took place but not for personal gain. All administrations have sought to protect themselves from political fallout of scandals....In retrospect Watergate was one part wrongdoing, one part blundering, and one part political vendetta" (p. 38-39).

Richard Nixon's *Memoirs*, published in 1978, is an articulate, highly readable work. His later book, *In the Arena*, published in 1990, is a worthwhile follow-up along with Bruce Herschensohn's superb analysis of the power of media influence titled *The Gods of the Antenna*, published in 1976.

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