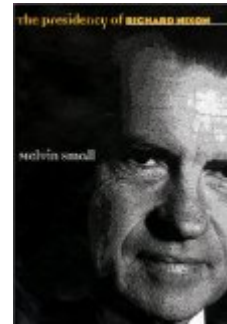


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Melvin Small. *The Presidency of Richard Nixon*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1999. xix + 387 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7006-0973-4.

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## Nixon Is the One

When Richard Nixon remarked to David Frost in 1977 that “What history says about this administration will depend upon who writes history,” he had a point.[1] Indeed, history is what historians make of it. But although historians very often differ with each other over interpretative matters, their work, at the very least, must be molded to fit the pattern of the existing or current historical record if it is to have any explanatory value worthy of serious intellectual and professional consideration.

In general, historians, for good reason, have viewed Nixon’s presidency as a failure, and, on lists of the forty two presidents who have occupied that high office, they have ranked him consistently at the bottom. But unlike many other presidents, Nixon, because of the nature of his political highs and lows and the historical importance of his administration, has proven to be an endlessly fascinating subject for historians and biographers alike. Historian Stephen Ambrose, for example, sees Nixon as “Shakespearean like no other American politician.” Historian Joan Hoff points to a record of domestic accomplishments that adds a fresh dimension to Nixon’s story, which historians concentrating only on Vietnam and Watergate have understandably ignored.[2]

By expanding his focus beyond Vietnam and Watergate, Melvin Small contributes a well-researched and smoothly written account of Richard Nixon’s Presidency. He integrates a vast secondary literature with a variety of primary documents and, thus, provides the reader with an overview and analysis of Nixon’s presidency that captures its singularity and importance in a straightforward

and evenhanded manner. Small’s work stands as the best one volume extant for students needing an analytically sound and factually reliable history of an administration whose fate changed American and world history.

After praising Nixon’s creative undertaking in foreign policy, especially with regard to Sino-American and Soviet-American relations, Small contends that Nixon’s foreign policy initiatives “marked the beginning of the end of the cold war” (p. 125). In so doing, he makes clear that it was Nixon, not Henry Kissinger, who pushed these various departures forward. Put simply, Kissinger served as Nixon’s tactician, helping to employ the politics of linkage, while Nixon functioned as the master strategist and initiator of policy virtually to the end of his presidency, notwithstanding the impact of Watergate.

Small’s careful review and analysis of Nixon’s Vietnam policy illustrates that point very well. There, as elsewhere, Nixon called the shots. He escalated the war in Cambodia; he ordered the bombing of Hanoi in May 1972; and he prevented Kissinger from going to Hanoi in October 1972 to lay the groundwork for ending the war sooner than he, Nixon, desired. Like Lyndon Johnson before him, Nixon wanted to achieve peace with honor, and his policies were designed to prevent the loss of South Vietnam for as long as possible.

Small’s discussion of Nixon’s domestic policies is also full of arresting detail, which may surprise many readers unfamiliar with that aspect of the story. As he suggests, Nixon’s record was sufficiently progressive that, given what came later, he could be called the last liberal

president. A few examples will suffice: Nixon allocated sixty percent more for social spending in fiscal year 1974 than Johnson in 1968. He signed into law major environmental legislation, including the Endangered Species Act, the National Environmental Protection Act, and amendments to the Clean Air Act. And he proposed a Family Assistance Plan (FAP), which, according to Small, would have federalized welfare and both provided aid to the working poor and for the setting of national standards. Opposition to Nixon's enlightened plan from congressional liberals and Republican conservatives alike, and his own subsequent loss of interest, killed a historic opportunity to make useful changes to then current system, which years later set the stage for the abolition of the federal entitlement program known as Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC).

Whatever the drift of Nixon's generally centrist politics and policies, which Ronald Reagan would later seek to overturn, the key to Nixon's tenure, for which he will always be remembered, is his resignation as president of the United States. Small does well in reconstructing the context that led to that resignation. And he rightly condemns Nixon's behavior, saying that "no president before or after ordered or participated in so many serious illegal and extra legal acts that violated constitutional principles" (p.310). As a consequence of Watergate, the well of American politics has been corrupted by a toxin from which it has yet to recover.

In a number of ways, Richard Nixon stood at the

crossroads of recent American history. A transitional president, he laid the groundwork for a strong Republican presence in the South. At the same time, he continued to shore up the welfare state even as stagflation was beginning to erode confidence in government and as conservative opposition to his policies mounted. He also functioned as an imperial president who generated strong congressional reaction to his arrogant policies and treatment, which helps to explain why Congress pursued the Watergate investigations so vigorously. Yet his detente policy, even as it faltered in his last year in office, pointed the way to the large-scale detente of the Reagan years. Clearly, the Nixon presidency is of historic importance, with or without Watergate. Small does a worthy job of complicating its story without giving us exculpation.

#### Notes

[1]. Joan Hoff, "Richard Milhous Nixon," in *The American Presidents* (Garland Publishing: New York, 2000), p. 428.

[2]. "CBS News Sunday Morning," January 26, 1997; Joan Hoff, *Nixon Reconsidered* (New York: Basic Books, 1994).

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