

# **Arizona's Statesman: Congressman John J. Rhodes**

## **The Watergate Era**

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As "Point Man" for President Nixon in the U.S. House of Representatives, Minority Leader John Rhodes was expected to rally his party to support the Republican administration.

On Sunday, August 4, 1974, just days before Nixon would resign and when speculation about Rhodes's decision on impeachment of the president was rampant, the following article was published in the Washington Star-News. It illustrates well the press and public interest in Rhodes's position and the difficulties he encountered after becoming Minority Leader.

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Under increasing pressure from the press, the public, and his colleagues, Rhodes defended the President as long as was possible; in the end, however, he followed his conscience. In the following essay, John Rhodes recounts his experiences during that critical juncture in American history. His account is augmented by notes that his press secretary, Jay Smith, kept during the watershed year of 1974.

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In October, 1983, John Rhodes was asked to speak on the Nixon Presidency at the Second Thomas P. O'Neill, Jr. Symposium on American Politics at Boston College. His remarks are presented here in its entirety due to their exceptional perceptiveness and Rhodes's remarkable insight into the office of the presidency.

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**A Leader's Anguish**  
**For no one in the House of Representatives is impeachment a more fateful issue than John Rhodes, leader of the President's party.**

**Sunday, August 4, 1974**

**By Isabelle Shelton**  
**Star-News Staff Writer**

The man in the impeachment hot seat this week end is House Minority Leader John J. Rhodes of Arizona.

Anyone who watched the anguished faces of House Judiciary Committee members on television last week could not help but be sympathetic to what Rhodes has suffered as he tried to think his way through his dilemma.

The congressman, who helped launch fellow Arizonan Barry Goldwater's presidential bid, and who shares most of Goldwater's conservative views, is a Nixon loyalist all the way.

At least he always has been.

Now he is coming face to face with his conscience on impeachment, and he has told reporters he is deeply troubled by some of the evidence against the President.

"He's probably in the most difficult position of anyone right now; he's damned if he does and damned if he doesn't," says his longtime close friend Melvin Laird, former congressman, defense secretary and staff aide at the Nixon White House, now with Readers Digest.

"He's not the only one on the spot, but it's a problem for him sooner because he's a leader," Laird added.

"I assume all his instincts are to stay with Nixon and the party, but he's a decent, honorable man, a man of integrity," says Rep. Morris Udall, a liberal Democrat from Arizona.

"He's a team player, he wants to help his party, his President, but he would not do anything wrong," Udall added. "I would say he would not be a lackey for the White House. He would call the signals on his own."

Rhodes has said if he decides he must vote against "my President" he will temporarily step down from his leadership post, turning it over to someone "who could lead a vigorous, vociferous and effective defense of the President. I think the President is entitled to that."

That leadership decision gave Rhodes less time than his colleagues to make up his mind, because if he does relinquish his post to someone else, he owes that person time to prepare his defense.

Rhodes says he will announce his decision at a 10:30 a.m. press conference tomorrow on live TV. He had said he would make his announcement last Wednesday but postponed it because he had not yet made up his mind. He did decide, however, later that day.

He has been spending long hours reading the House Judiciary Committee evidence and testimony, and there is a report that he is particularly disturbed by the apparent misuse of government agencies by the Nixon White House. Those charges form the core of the second article of impeachment voted last week by the Judiciary Committee.

House colleagues and others following the course of the impeachment are watching Rhodes' moves closely, because there has been a view that if the conservative Arizonan deserts Nixon, he will pull many conservative GOP members over the side with him.

Rhodes acknowledges that probably would be the result, if he does defect.

Melvin Laird disagrees.

"Impeachment is a matter of individual conscience," he argues. "Nobody is going to cast his vote just because of what someone else does. I really feel most members will vote their conscience. It's not easy. This will be the toughest vote most of these people will ever have to cast."

Laird, who was seen prowling the halls of Congress at least two days last week, presumably knows what Rhodes is going to do, but he's not talking. Whether Laird was up there twisting arms for the President—or just taking soundings—was not clear either.

Other observers say the tide is now running so fast against Nixon in the House of Representatives that "pretty soon John Rhodes won't be leading no matter what he does. He may be running to catch up."

Rhodes himself agrees that as of now a majority of the House would vote for impeachment—but not a majority of Republicans, he says.

"You have to bear in mind that it is a very volatile situation that ebbs and flows—though the tide seems to be flowing away from the President right now."

Rhodes warned Ben Cole of the Arizona Republic last week not "to second guess me," but there is a growing belief around the Capitol that the Arizonan probably will come out against Nixon.

The mere fact that he raised the possibility himself, by saying he might have to step down from the leadership, fuels that view, and a few of the GOP congressmen who were meeting with him in rap sessions all last week came to the conclusion.

While he is not willing to tip his hand on the ending, he seems to have the scenario all worked out in his mind. He should step aside if he deserts Nixon, he says, because:

"One, Mr. Nixon was elected by the Republican party. Two, I think most Republicans would expect the leader of their party in the House to support the head of his own party. And three, if I don't support him, then I think the leadership post should be held by someone who does."

He even has thought through the process for finding a temporary leader. He believes he should make the selection. "I think I would pick someone obviously and openly in support of the President," perhaps (House Republican Whip) Leslie Arends or "a Judiciary Committee member who voted with the President. It should be somebody that the people who would support the President would find no fault with."

Rhodes thinks his Republican colleagues probably would “forgive” him if he opts for impeachment, even though he thinks the majority—in their hearts, if not their votes—lean the other way.

Rhodes is a loner in congressional matters, unlike his more gregarious predecessor, Gerald Ford.

“Jerry Ford would never have had to hold a series of meetings with members to find out what they were thinking; he would just always know; he’d sort of absorb the ideas from around him,” says a veteran Capitol Hill reporter.

Rhodes, who barely got his feet wet as minority leader before impeachment began, “was catapulted into that position at a very difficult time,” says a colleague.

Succeeding without contest (potential rivals all faded away) after Ford was sworn in as vice president last Dec. 7, Rhodes has tried to rally GOP forces, but the enlarging shadow of impeachment has tended to fog the whole congressional process this year.

His colleagues give him good marks for diligence and intelligence.

“He’s not a slap-on-the-back kind of guy, but he’s one of those people who does not have enemies; I do not know anyone who dislikes or distrusts him,” says Udall. “He’s reasonable, sensitive, introspective—really a first rate man.”

“A man of exceedingly high character; he reigns with a cool hand,” says reporter Ben Cole, who has covered him for years. “He has a sense of the appropriateness of things. I think that’s what gives him such outstanding leadership qualities.”

“He doesn’t joke and back slap like Jerry Ford, but he’s smarter; he’s highly respected,” says a colleague.

From time to time Rhodes has dropped mini bomb shells on the White House in the Watergate matter. He said on May 9, after the edited transcripts were released by the White House, that the President “should be considering” the possibility of resigning.

He also called on the President to give the Judiciary Committee the evidence it said it needed. And when invited on one of those Nixon cruises down the Potomac on the yacht Sequoia, he pleaded a previous engagement.

Kidded later by a reporter for rejecting “Cleopatra’s barge,” the usually shy, restrained congressman astonished his listeners by saying: “When I get on a barge, I want a broad.”

It was hardly what the White House had expected from a loyal lieutenant on Capitol Hill.

Yet Rhodes had tried to carry water for the President earlier in the year, by getting what he thought was an agreement from Judiciary Committee chairman Peter Rodino to bring impeachment to the House floor by April. He thought that would get the matter out of the way before lengthy hearings could inflame the public and before election panic set in among members of Congress.

The agreement fell apart for various reasons—one big one being White House intransigence in turning over subpoenaed tapes, which slowed down the whole process. The committee finally acted without the tapes.

John Rhodes, 57, first came to Congress in 1953 in the Eisenhower landslide. He and Goldwater had started out in Arizona politics together. He says he is “somewhere to the right of center,” but his record seems to put him further to the right than that. He is an ardent defender of “right to work” laws, for instance. He sees the Democrats’ drive to create a “veto-proof Congress” as opening the door to “a wave of pro-labor legislation.” But he denies he is “a labor baiter or hater.”

He worked his way up the seniority ladder in the House to the second ranking spot on the powerful Appropriations Committee, and was chairman of the House Republican Policy Committee before moving to his new spot.

Until he became minority leader he generally has tended to work behind the scenes. The subjects that fascinate him, in any case, do not generally make for zippy headlines. He considers his work on the Joint Committee on Budget Control “one of the most gratifying experiences of my congressional life.”

Rhodes and his wife Betty live in Bethesda. Their four children give him the accolade that they never felt a generation gap.

The family had the time of its life last summer taking a five-day float trip down the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon. It was a big group that included several in-laws of eldest son Jay (John III), 30, the only one who is married.

The others are Tom, 27, who works in a bank in Phoenix; Elizabeth, 20, a junior in political science at Whittier College (Richard Nixon’s alma mater, but there is no connection, Mrs. Rhodes says), and Scott, 17, who will be a junior at Landon School in Bethesda this fall.

This year’s vacation for the Rhodes’ has consisted of two days at Ocean City, Md., and they think that’s all they are likely to get.

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# The Watergate Era

[Click Here to View a Video Excerpt of John Rhodes's Role in the Watergate Scandal. Select 'Watergate' from the Menu.](#)

*Excerpt from "I was There" (Rhodes & Smith), © 1995.*

When I first met [Richard Nixon](#) at the 1952 Republican National Convention he did not seem destined for high political office, and his ascendancy to the national ticket came as a surprise. When I heard that Ike's choice as a running mate was Richard Nixon, the junior senator (from California), my reaction was "Nixon who?" From that inauspicious beginning, Richard Nixon became a force in the Republican Party by dint of hard work and a keen analytical mind. Although most people, particularly the press, tend to type Richard Nixon as an arch-conservative because of his strong anti-Communist convictions, he was in fact much more of a moderate and a pragmatist. But his superb resume and formidable political mind were coupled with personality flaws that contributed to much ambivalence and even hostility toward him.

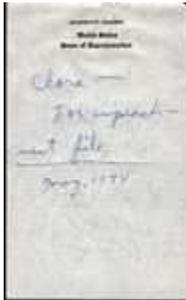
In 1968, Richard Nixon was elected president, defeating Democrat Hubert Humphrey by 110 electoral votes but only 0.7 percent of the popular vote (George Wallace made a rather strong showing in that year's presidential election). Nixon, perhaps because he came from California, which strongly embodies both liberal and conservative traditions, was particularly positioned to bridge the gap between the liberal and conservative wings of the Republican Party and defeat the candidate of a fractionated Democratic Party.

I believe Nixon's first term as president did great credit to himself and the country. Nixon was confronted with monumental problems in his first term: a sluggish economy, a rapid surge in inflation that sapped the confidence of investors and the public, and an unpopular and divisive war he had inherited from the two previous Democratic administrations and a hostile Congress with a huge Democratic majority. Nixon did what was necessary to bring around the economy and, despite the controversy surrounding the Vietnam War, was a very re-electable President in 1972. Nevertheless, you would never have known this

from the anxiety that permeated that year's Republican presidential campaign. Paranoia had always surrounded Richard Nixon in varying degrees, and he tended to isolate himself from people. I have always felt that he really didn't like people very much and that this quality was his greatest vulnerability, both politically and personally.

On June 17, 1972, burglars broke into the headquarters of the Democratic National Committee in the Watergate Building in Washington, setting in action a chain of events that became known as the Watergate scandal. I was pulled into the Watergate controversy because of my role in the Republican leadership of the House of Representatives and later as the Minority Leader during the impeachment inquiry.

At first, many of us in Congress said to ourselves, "What's the big deal? Political candidates have done this sort of thing before and nothing was really said about it." But as time wore on, the increasing number of high-level staffers giving evidence against each other, and subsequent indications that President Nixon was personally involved in some of these questionable activities, made the situation more and more difficult for those who supported him. What had been a minor event in the political "dirty tricks" manual became transformed by a failure of candor into a test of the honor and credibility of the President of the United States. As a moderate Republican and supporter of the President, I was a willing enlistee to defend him against what I then thought was a politically motivated lynching by partisan enemies. More importantly, after the resignation of Spiro Agnew as Vice President and the elevation of Jerry Ford to that office, I was elected Minority Leader of the House of Representatives. That required me to be a point man for the President as long as I could, and to try to keep the Republicans in the House united during these trying times.



*Click any image to enlarge.*

At the time of the impeachment inquiry (the Senate Select Committee's hearings began on May 17, 1973), feelings in Congress were running very high in all directions. Some Republicans wanted to abandon Nixon immediately for the good of the party; others said they would never bow down to his opponents under any circumstances. My increasingly difficult job was to navigate between those two factions.



I firmly believe that one of the most crucial factors in determining the fate of President Nixon during Watergate was a rather unlikely one: Spiro Agnew. There is little doubt in my mind that the Democrats never would have impeached Richard Nixon if Spiro Agnew had remained Vice President. They would never have taken such an action against him if the result of that action had been to create a situation in which Spiro Agnew was president for two years and then the Republican nominee for president in 1976.

This is not so improbable as it might sound today. Agnew was a potent political force in 1973, propelled into national prominence by a series of hard-line speeches expressing the frustration of the middle class toward the "media and other privileged elitists." His activities infuriated the Democrats, but enthralled Republicans and most independents. In 1976 he could have been a formidable, perhaps even a dominant, candidate for president. The smart Democrats were terrified of this prospect. Furthermore, I believe that Agnew as President would have escaped the fate of Gerald Ford because he probably would not have pardoned Richard Nixon. Although on one can ever know for sure, I believe the combination of Agnew's political toughness and personal dislike of Nixon would have resulted in this outcome if Agnew had ever become president.

I could almost hear sighs of relief from my Democratic colleagues on the House floor when Agnew resigned as Vice President on October 10, 1973 to avoid prosecution by the Justice Department. Not only was a large obstacle to Democratic presidential success in 1976 removed, but a less obvious but welcome opportunity was about to present itself.

Two days later, Nixon picked the universally popular Gerald Ford to be his new vice president. The appointment was well received, especially by those of us who knew and respected Gerald Ford. However, it turned out to be, again in my opinion, another major strategic error for Richard Nixon. On the surface, there were good reasons to pick Ford to succeed Agnew. His performance as House Minority leader had earned him the respect of Republicans without causing Democrats to hate him. He had a collegial personality that was the foundation of his great popularity. I also believe Nixon thought Ford would help him avoid impeachment, because he thought Ford could influence members of Congress to be less harsh toward the President.

But it turned out exactly opposite. Ford's position and worthy personal characteristics worked to neutralize his political effectiveness with the Democrats. No one was afraid of Jerry Ford. Democrats regarded him as a non-polarizing figure who wouldn't go on the offensive against them. With Gerald Ford as president, the Democrats did not fear the results of the 1976 presidential election with Ford as the probable Republican candidate. From then on, many Congressional Democrats were in full pursuit of the goal of disgrace and removal of the rival they hated: Richard Nixon.

During much of 1973, I felt comfortable in defending the President because I believed that, as problematical as all the revelations about Watergate were, there was as yet no evidence that the President had committed an impeachable offense. However, on July 16, 1973, Alexander Butterfield dropped a bombshell during the Senate Select Committee hearings, revealing that conversations in the Oval Office had been automatically taped and that the tapes were obviously available. Nixon apparently received a legal opinion advising him that he did not need to release the tapes because they were his personal property. Thus he felt he was on solid enough legal ground to refuse to comply with a subpoena. The decision was challenged in the courts and eventually the Supreme Court ordered that the tapes be made available to the special prosecutor, the Senate Select Committee, and the House Judiciary Committee.

*On July 25, 1973, Nixon refused to turn over the tapes, citing executive privilege. On February 11, 1974, by a vote of 33-3, Richard Nixon became the first President in U.S. history to be subpoenaed by a committee of the House due to his refusal to turn over the tapes. He did, however, release edited transcripts of the tapes on April 30, 1974, "placing his trust in the basic fairness of the American people". The Supreme Court's 8-0 ruling did not come until July 24, 1974.*

From that moment on, the political fortunes of the President declined dramatically.

I became even more deeply involved in Watergate when the House Judiciary Committee began to hold hearings (on May 9, 1974) on whether or not to send an impeachment resolution to the full House for a vote. I was well aware that if a resolution of impeachment were to be sent to the floor of the House I, as Republican leader, would be put in the position of leading the defense of the Republican President of the United States. I wanted to be certain that there was no “smoking gun” that would definitively point to obstruction of justice or some other impeachable conduct on his part.

As Minority Leader, I believed it was necessary for me to make a statement and to take a position on impeachment before the Judiciary Committee voted on the impeachment resolution. (On July 27–30, 1974, the Judiciary Committee passed three articles of impeachment.) So I scheduled a press conference to announce my decision. The Sunday morning before my press conference, however, I received a call from Al Haig, White House chief of staff. He strongly suggested that I call off my press conference until he was able to talk to me.

Thinking that Haig was worried that I was going to come out against his boss, I tried to reassure him. “Al, there’s something you should know,” I said. “My intention is to announce that I will not be voting for the articles of impeachment.”

There was a pause on the other end of the line. Finally, General Haig said, “Nevertheless, John, I advise you to postpone your press conference. There is going to be a development tomorrow that you need to know about first.” He then promised that I would be briefed the next day. My press secretary, Jay Smith, and I decided to cancel the press conference. We both thought Haig’s call may have meant that President Nixon was going to announce his resignation.

On Monday morning I received a call from my old friend Dean Burch, who was on the White House staff. Dean asked if he could come out to see me and bring some material for me to read. What happened at the meeting confirmed a disturbing dream I had had months ago in which I rode down Pennsylvania Avenue to the White House with Barry Goldwater and told President Nixon he had to resign.

When Dean Burch arrived around 10 o’clock, he was accompanied by Fred Buzhardt, the president’s counsel, and George Bush, then chairman of the Republican National Committee. Buzhardt had brought a small but highly explosive bomb. He put before me a previously unreleased transcript of a June 23, 1973 Oval Office conversation. What I read was a transcript of a conversation between President Nixon and Bob Haldeman, in which the president instructed Haldeman to order the Central Intelligence Agency to stop the Federal Bureau of Investigation from investigating the Watergate burglary on the basis of “national security.” This was obstruction of justice—the “smoking gun” I had been dreading. President Nixon had committed at least one impeachable offense—he had implicated himself with his own words, recorded on his own tapes.



*Jay Smith recalls that, after reading the transcript, Rhodes said, "This means that there's just no chance in the world that he's not going to be impeached. In fact, there's no chance in the world that I won't vote to impeach him."*

In the early afternoon of August 6, I returned to Capitol Hill. News of the June 23 "smoking gun" tape had found its way into the press, so it was the talk of the town. On the way to my office in the Capitol, a gaggle of reporters shouted questions. Someone asked when I was going to reschedule my press conference. Someone else suggested that today would be a good time. I had already decided to do it that afternoon, knowing, as the press did not, that I would have to rewrite my statement.

*Jay Smith recalls that Rhodes said he would tell the press that the new evidence changed his mind on Article I (obstruction of justice) and that he was still considering voting yes on Article II (abuse of power). "The hours before the press conference were ones of high drama. Two interns were driven to Rhodes's home to pick up a dark suit and tie for him to wear at the press conference; the Congressman contacted his wife, Betty, who was golfing, and asked her to come to the Capitol. Minutes before the press conference was scheduled, Rhodes was still in the Speaker's office conferring with other House leaders, unaware that the three major networks intended to interrupt their scheduled programming to cover Rhodes's statement live—the only time in U.S. history that a Minority Leader's press conference has been shown on live television. Jay Smith sent a note in that stated "Mr. Rhodes, the networks plan to go live with your press conference at 4:00. We have to walk over to Rayburn directly." With only a few minutes to air, both trotted briskly to the Rayburn Building".*

The press conference was carried live at 4 p.m. by all three major television networks. It's not often that a Minority Leader's statement rates such high visibility, but such was the fever of the moment.

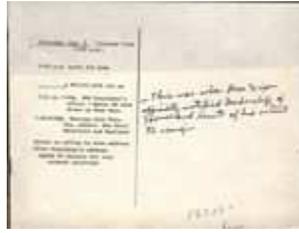


I began by saying, "For me, this is a sad day." Then I announced my decision to vote aye on Article I of the impeachment resolution "due to the principle that no person, whether he is black or white, rich or poor, ordinary citizen or President of the United States, is above the law."



When I finished reading my statement, the press corps did something they had never done in my experience: they applauded.

The next day, August 7, I received a call from Al Haig saying that the President wanted to meet with Senator [Hugh Scott](#), Senator [Barry Goldwater](#) and me in the afternoon. When we arrived at the White House, we did not meet in the Oval Office, but in the President's "working office" next door.



*Jay Smith recalls that, before the three men were ushered into the President's office, Al Haig said, "He's (Nixon's) been up and down. It (resignation) is about 90% with him right now. Please don't raise the question of resignation. He knows what you're going to tell him about the situation. He needs to hear it from you."*

Nixon asked me if it were true that all but about twenty-five members of the House would vote for impeachment, and I answered, "Yes, that's my assessment of the situation."

Then he turned to Barry Goldwater and said, "And I understand that if the matter came before the Senate, there would be an overwhelming vote for conviction."

Barry replied, "That is true."

The President said he had called us in to verify the report his staff had given him concerning his chances of remaining in office. He said he had a terrible decision to make and wanted us to know he would make it in what he deemed to be the interests of the country. He said he was not considering the possibility of a pardon or amnesty, and was not worried about his pension. (I got the very strong impression that he had already decided to resign when he talked to us.)

The President thanked us for coming to meet with him. As we were about to leave, I said, "Mr. President, when we leave, we will be confronted by the press. They will ask us what we told you and what you told us. It would be my hope that we would say we discussed your situation, that you did not ask us for any advice, and that we did not give you any." The President said he hoped this would be exactly what we would do, and we did.

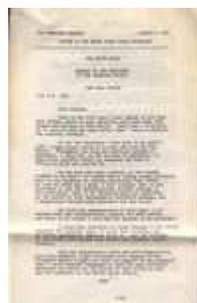
*Jay Smith recalls that, as they left the President's office, Goldwater said to Rhodes, "Is there any doubt in your mind what he's going to do?" Rhodes replied, "No. Any doubt in yours?" "No," Goldwater said. "It's sort of amazing: here's the first time this has ever happened, and who was sitting there with the President? Two guys from one of the smallest states." When asked, the next morning, if the meeting with Nixon was rough, Rhodes told Jay Smith, "Not really, the President made it easy. He was just great."*



The next evening, August 9, I was invited to the White House again, this time for a 6 p.m. meeting in the President's Office in the Executive Office Building. The "Big Six" in the congressional leadership were present: Senator [Eastland](#), Senator Scott and Senator [Mansfield](#) from the Senate leadership, and Speaker Albert, Majority Leader [O'Neill](#), and me from the House side.

The President was in complete control of himself. His legal staff had told him they felt the Constitution required him to notify the Congress of his intention to resign. Rather than doing this at a special session,

he decided to do it by informing the leadership of both houses and both parties.



He did not read a formal statement, but told us what he intended to do. Various members made sympathetic remarks. I did not. As we left the President, I hung back and was the last to leave the room. We shook hands. I put my hand on his shoulder and said, "Stay in touch." He turned away quickly and his shoulders were shaking.

That was the last time I saw Richard Nixon one on one.

*Jay Smith recalls that, following the meeting with the President, John Rhodes returned to his office where his wife waited, watching the news on television. At one point Sam Donaldson of ABC News stuck his head in the office and was invited to come in. He began a touching soliloquy about how much the press grew to respect Mr. Rhodes throughout the long ordeal. Rhodes thanked him and said "Sam, I know you can understand why I couldn't tell you before tonight that the President is going to resign." Donaldson smiled and said goodbye, backed out of the office with a wave, and literally raced the length of the corridor outside. Minutes later, his distinctive voice was heard on TV. He was standing in front of the Capitol, microphone in hand, saying "It's official. ABC has learned that President Richard M. Nixon will go on television at nine o'clock to announce his [resignation of the presidency](#). This just confirmed by House Minority Leader John Rhodes." Rhodes was livid. In the exhausting strain of the day, he'd assumed the conversation was private. In later years, however, he said that "time heals many wounds and if Sam Donaldson were buying the drinks, well...."*

*In the aftermath of Watergate, Gerald Ford issued a presidential pardon of Richard Nixon on September 8, 1974 (just prior to the November elections). The House lost 48 Republican seats; John Rhodes was reelected with just 51 percent of the vote. In the next Congress, he was reelected Minority Leader, again, unanimously.*

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## The Nixon Presidency

I have been asked to discuss the presidency of Richard Nixon. I am glad to try, but first I must define the yardstick I am using in measuring this man and his stewardship.

Many people have tried to formulate a job description for the president of the United States. It isn't easy. There is no such thing as on-the-job training. The individual who succeeds to the presidency must take whatever baggage he already possesses and try to grow into the job.

The presidency of the United States is undoubtedly the toughest job in the world. Not only does the president have the personal responsibility for executing the laws passed by the Congress, he is also the person responsible for assessing the state of the union and recommending legislation which appears to be necessary for the welfare of the nation. The president and vice president are the only two people elected by all of the people of the United States. The president is, therefore, the undoubted and unchallenged leader of the nation. Since our nation is the strongest one in the Free World, this makes him in effect the leader of the Free World. The capability of the person who fills that position is extremely important. Its requirements are awesome indeed.

A prime requisite for a president is a thorough knowledge of history. I happen to believe profoundly in the truism "the past is prologue." Unless the president is well aware of situations which have occurred in the history of the world in general and this country in particular, he will likely be overwhelmed by some of the problems that he faces. He will also be tempted to reinvent the wheel on too many occasions instead of following paths which had succeeded in the past.

The president must also have a thorough knowledge of the contemporary world, and a sound basis in geopolitics. He needs to know the scenery on the stage upon which he will perform. He also needs to know the other members of the cast, who, like himself, are heads of state.

The president must have an understanding of both the domestic and world economies. As the leader of the

strongest nation in the Free World he bears a large share of the responsibility for keeping a stable economy capable of producing the necessities required for the health and happiness of its people. The interplay of the forces of supply and demand, the intricacies of the international monetary system, and the needs and aspirations of the nations of the world are worthy of his concentrated study.

The system of alliances and understandings around the world, and the hopes and fears of the people and leaders of the various nations are items of indispensable knowledge to one who must be concerned with world politics.

The president must have the ability to communicate. The greatest ideas are of no value unless they are expressed in such a way that they can be understood and appraised by the leaders and the people of the world.

A president must have at least the personal attributes, which I list without reference to the order of priority:

1. An economic and political philosophy
2. A liking for his fellow man
3. The ability to make decisions promptly
4. Personal integrity
5. Belief in a Supreme Being
6. A dash of humility
7. A lot of self-confidence

A president must have, or he must very quickly acquire, a deep knowledge of the three branches of government and the way each impinges upon the other. Equally important is a knowledge of the framework of the various state governments and the particular problems and assets of each state. The last but by no means least attribute of a successful president is a well-developed sense of humor. His failures will be many. His vexations will be frequent. The people and the news media will frequently misjudge him, and he will feel that they are being unfair. Unless he is able to keep his eye on the big picture, and put the lesser annoyances which he must endure in their proper places, he will not only not be able to do a good job, he will loathe every minute of his incumbency.

Measuring the Richard Nixon who was elected president in 1968 against this job description, you come to the conclusion that this man was as well prepared for the presidency as any person in our country's history. He had served in the House and the Senate, and for eight years as vice president of the United States. If there had been a presidential training school, he would have graduated cum laude. He certainly had a fine knowledge of history, the contemporary world, and geopolitics. He was never a great student of the domestic economy or the world economy, but he certainly understood the interplay of international politics and geopolitics, as well as any man could. He and Henry Kissinger made a superb team in the conduct of foreign policy because each had a basic understanding of the world and its problems, and the kind of treatment needed to further the interest of the United States of America while dealing with other nations.

Richard Nixon certainly had the ability to communicate. He was a forceful and convincing speaker. He spoke without notes, but certainly not without preparation. In fact, I was in his hotel room on an occasion prior to his election to the presidency, when he was writing a speech on a yellow pad. I asked him if he had the means of having it typed and he said "Oh no, I don't want to type it. In fact, I'll probably tear it up after

I memorize it.'

His personal attributes would give him a mixed score. He certainly had a philosophy and the ability to make decisions. There is grave doubt as to whether or not he really liked his fellow man, and, in the latter days of his administration, his personal integrity was subject to question. As for humility, I doubt that he could even spell the word. He gave the impression of being supremely self-confident. However, I am told that some psychologists might come to the conclusion that the ego displayed came from a deep-seated feeling of inferiority. I am not making that judgment, but I do advance the possibility that persons more qualified than I in psychology have done so.

While I would not really say that President Nixon had a well-developed sense of humor, he certainly did have a sense of humor. One personal instance bears out this analysis. At a leadership meeting when I was chairman of the Republican Policy Committee, there was a question as to whether the Congress would take a certain action before adjourning for a long recess. I said:

"Mr. President, if Congress does not act, I suggest very strongly that you call the Congress back into Special Session for the purpose of completing this legislation. If you do this, I would also like to request protection from the Secret Service, because my own colleagues will probably try to assassinate me for what I have just said".

I went back to my office and within one hour my secretary told me that Mr. Smith, a Secret Service man, was outside and wanted to talk to me. He came into my private office and said "President Nixon has told me to be at your disposal and protect your life" I said, "Is this the way President Nixon tells me he will call the Congress back into Special Session?" The gentleman said, "I don't know, Sir, but he told me to stay with you until I was dismissed." I said, "You're dismissed now, and tell the President that I get his message."

Richard Nixon was elected president in 1968 over [Hubert Humphrey](#) by a margin not much larger than the one by which John Kennedy had defeated him in 1960. Both houses of Congress were dominated by the Democratic party. President Nixon was never popular with Democrats. He was extremely partisan, and had, in the Jerry Voorhees and [Helen Gahagan Douglas](#) campaigns, been accused of being not only partisan but unfair. His personality could be very brusque, and very brash. In some ways he was easy to dislike, and many Democrats found those ways.

Thus, he came in with an uncertain mandate, and with many members of the congressional majority prepared to dislike him. This was not an enviable position, to put it mildly.

Also, President Nixon inherited the most unpopular war in our history. When he took office, we had over one-half million Americans in Vietnam. We had suffered casualties which saddened and sickened most of the American population. Our reasons for being in the war were never explained adequately by either the Kennedy administration or the Johnson administration and, therefore, our people were making sacrifices that they did not want to make and did not understand.

During the 1968 campaign, Nixon said that he had a way to end the war. He never elaborated on this until after he became president. Then it became apparent that he truly did want to end the war but not with the loss of South Vietnam to the Communists. His secretary of defense, Melvin R. Laird, was the author of the Vietnamization program. The concept was to build up the capabilities of the South Vietnamese army and air force so that the United States could withdraw its forces and South Vietnam could defend itself from incursions from the predatory North Vietnamese.

Unfortunately, intervening events made it impossible to complete the process of Vietnamization successfully. The "sixties' generation" mainly were disenchanted with the war. It is true that most of the

members of that generation went along loyally and served in the armed forces when drafted, but many of that generation and other Americans too, demonstrated against the war. In many instances, those demonstrations turned into full-fledged riots. Draft dodging and desertion were common. The situation at home was not good, to say the least.

Although Richard Nixon was supposed to have been a “tough guy,” those demonstrations and the fervor of the opposition to the Vietnam war disturbed him deeply. They also encouraged the North Vietnamese and made it more difficult to have meaningful negotiations for peace between the belligerents.

Even so, by the end of 1972, things were going our way. The full-fledged attack of the North Vietnamese in a conventional manner employing many divisions, which occurred in late 1972, was turned back, largely by the South Vietnamese. The bombing which took place in December of 1972 and January of 1973 practically decimated the ability of North Vietnam to support the war. It was then that the North Vietnamese finally agreed to meaningful negotiations, and the treaty which purported to end the Vietnam War was signed in 1973.

As we know, the Vietnam War was not thus concluded. The South Vietnamese held the North Vietnamese at bay for almost two years, with the help which we gave them. However, in the end, the South Vietnamese were overrun by a cunning, resourceful enemy who refused to play by the rules we thought they had agreed to.

The final blow to South Vietnam came when the House of Representatives refused to adopt an emergency authorization and appropriation of \$300 million, asked for by President Ford, to bolster the South Vietnamese forces, which were in danger of being overrun. The morale of the South Vietnamese was shattered. They were confronted by an enemy who was freshly supplied by Russia, freshly manned, and whose infrastructure had been rebuilt. Their own infrastructure was a shambles. They were short of ammunition, fuel, transportation, aircraft, and most of the munitions of war. The final debacle was certain and foreseeable.

It is easy to second guess Nixon’s conduct of the Vietnam War. As previously mentioned, he felt deeply the divisions in the nation which sprang from American involvement in Vietnam. Perhaps this caused him to start withdrawing increments of American troops, probably sooner than he should have. I can certainly understand the political desirability of “bringing the boys home.” However, withdrawal of Americans at that time, with Vietnamization still a dream and North Vietnamese troops still on the soil of South Vietnam, gave the wrong signal to everyone. It encouraged the North Vietnamese, discouraged the South Vietnamese, and did not help the domestic situation very much.

There were times when the North Vietnamese army was almost completely committed in South Vietnam. Hindsight indicates that an Inchon-type landing in North Vietnam at that time promised great success in disorganizing and perhaps overrunning the logistical rear of the North Vietnamese army. Had we been committed to winning that war, we would have found this opportunity to be irresistible.

Many of us felt that it was a mistake for the United States to have involved itself so deeply in Vietnam. However, since we were there, and so deeply mired in that struggle, it may have been that the best way out was to do everything necessary for the conquest of North Vietnam. After that, Vietnamization could have proceeded full speed, with almost 100 percent assurance of success. This would have taken longer American involvement, but in the final analysis, we may have had success instead of failure and perhaps would have shortened the war considerably.

However, by the time this opportunity occurred, the United States had been led to anticipate an end to American involvement in this unpopular war. Even a president who had been recently elected by an overwhelming majority might have found trouble maintaining popular support for an escalation. The mold

had already been set, and we now know that the course to eventual loss of South Vietnam was then irreversible.

Had President Nixon's mandate in 1968 been greater, he might well have taken a more aggressive course in Vietnam—one calculated to bring victory. Vietnamization was a gamble which might well have worked had the support of the American people for our effort in that part of the world not waned so rapidly. As it turned out, Vietnamization took at least four years, and then, because of the failure of American public support, failed. Perhaps President Nixon should have realized that the time it would take for Vietnamization was probably not available to him considering the rapidity with which American support for the war was disappearing. Then he would have had only two alternatives: (1) cut and run, getting our people out as fast as possible, or (2) adopt a strategy calculated to win the war.

I do not fault his choice of the Vietnamization strategy, considering the situation which confronted him. I only regret that under the circumstance it was not possible to have followed a course which would have saved the people of Indochina from the agony they have suffered.

The tragic sequence of events we call "Watergate" must be dealt with. The most destructive phase of Watergate was the weakening of the American presidency just at a time when a strong president could have completed the work of Vietnamization and ensured the survival of a Democratic regime in Indochina. Instead of that, as the capabilities of our allies decreased, the Soviet Union rebuilt North Vietnam, resupplied its army, and enabled it to break the solemn obligations of the Treaty of Paris. The War Powers Act, obviously aimed at the already wounded President Nixon, cast further doubts upon American capabilities or desires to insist upon the performance of obligations undertaken under the Treaty of Paris. There was no longer any doubt that whatever North Vietnam did, we no longer had the will to intervene.

I do not intend to go into a long dissertation on Watergate. Suffice it to say that in my opinion, the combination of the unpopular Vietnam War and the overreaction of Richard Nixon to leaks of information from the White House probably were the root causes of the events which finally led to the resignation of a president of the United States.

I was well aware that the Nixon White House leaked like a sieve. On at least three occasions after meetings of the Republican leadership in the Cabinet Room, [Jack Anderson](#) quoted verbatim conversations which took place at those meetings. He quoted me several times, and always did so with absolute accuracy. It was enough to disturb anyone, and I certainly have no fault to find with the desire of President Nixon to discover the source of those leaks. Nonetheless, the formation of the "plumbers" was a classic bit of overkill. It was never properly controlled, and at last lurched into the chaos which not only brought down Richard Nixon, but damaged the Republican party almost beyond repair.

One of Richard Nixon's more noble attributes is loyalty to his friends. This virtue probably caused him to refrain from taking the actions which he should have taken as soon as Watergate broke, since many of those most intimately involved in the whole matter were close associates of the president.

I think every president should read Machiavelli's *The Prince*. The theme which runs through the entire work is "The Prince Must Survive." Others are expendable, but the prince and, in this case the presidency, must survive. Nixon's loyalty to his friends kept him from taking the action which any chief of state should have taken in order to protect not only the presidency, but the Republic itself.

It has always been a source of wonderment to me that the Nixon tapes were not destroyed. I know of no theory which adequately explains this. The best explanation I have heard is that both Bob Haldeman and Richard Nixon felt that the executive privilege would keep them from ever having to give up the tapes and that they could 'stonewall it' to the end. What a price to pay for an extended ego trip, which those tapes represented!

The domestic policy of the Nixon administration deserves comment. Although Nixon thought of himself as a conservative, some of his domestic proposals were more to the liking of liberals than they were to members of his own party. The Family Assistance Plan which was crafted by [Daniel Patrick Moynihan](#) was in many ways a good plan. It would have been terribly expensive in the early years, but it at least had a chance of getting many people back to work and off of the welfare rolls. I supported it, as did Gerald Ford and many others whose conservative credentials were impeccable. However, the plan failed because of lack of sufficient congressional support, even from traditional liberals.

Nixon proposed a plan to reorganize the executive branch which had a great deal of promise. The underlying idea was to reduce the number of people who reported to a single boss. The government would have been divided into four superdepartments each comprising part of the present departmental structures of the government. The Democratic party-dominated Congress would have no part of this plan.

In fact, the Democrats made it very difficult for President Nixon to do much of anything toward cutting the size of the government. In his budgets he requested changes which would have saved money and undertook unilaterally to impound funds in areas which he thought could be cut. The Impoundment Act severely limited the power of the president to refuse to spend funds appropriated by the Congress. The federal government is still suffering from this ill-considered piece of legislation. Future students of government may well look with favor on the economic policies Richard Nixon tried to adopt. Because Watergate and Vietnam have overshadowed so much of the Nixon domestic program, the jury will be out for many years.

As previously stated, in Richard Nixon you saw a man who was on paper better prepared for the presidency than practically any man in our history. On the other side of the coin are events, some of which were caused by the president and his staff and some of which were not, which combined to flaw the entire administration. You also see personal traits of character, and unexpected shortcomings of performance on the part of the president himself, which contributed mightily to the downfall of the Nixon administration.

It was not easy for some members of Congress, including this one, to decide for impeachment. Unfortunately, quite a few of my colleagues had such a personal dislike for Nixon that they would have voted for even harsher treatment. Those of us who had worked with the president and respected his capabilities came to several conclusions: (1) The words of the president taken from his own tapes amounted to flagrant obstruction of justice, (2) the president's support in the country was irreversibly low, and (3) leaving him in office would have ensured a crippled presidency until 1977. We had to conclude that removing him would be more likely to strengthen the country.



*[Click image to enlarge.](#)*

We are fortunate that Gerald Ford came in, healed a lot of wounds, and restored integrity and respect to the presidency. The Republic survived another harsh test, but only after paying a horrible price. The full cost of this sad episode is still undetermined, and only future generations will be truly able to assess its cost in treasure, broken lives, loss of world esteem, and lowered national self-respect.

The bottom line is that this is still a great country—probably the greatest in history—because a great people have willed it to be so. They still do.

*Rhodes, John. "The Nixon Presidency." In Modern Presidents and the Presidency. Edited by Mark Landy. Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1985. Printed by permission of the publisher.*

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