

Module 10: How Will Historians Treat Richard Nixon?

Conclusion

Was Nixon the last liberal president, or the first to represent the new conservatism of the late twentieth century? Was Nixon a scoundrel or a statesman? Was he a crook, or a man caught in a web not entirely of his own making? Your evaluation of the Nixon administration depends as much on your own political perspective — on how you gauge the present state of political affairs — as it does on the specific outcomes of Nixon's years in office.

Both past events and historians' own political points of view shape historical interpretation. Historians who value environmental protection and see the opening relations with China as a step toward a more peaceful world find in the Nixon administration much to admire. Those more troubled by the impact of political corruption on the democratic process will have no sympathy for the thirty-seventh president, whose administration seemed to set the tone for the immoral and unethical conduct uncovered in succeeding administrations. The historian Stanley Kutler, for example, has described Nixon as a crass, cynical, calculating, narrow-minded politician who took no action in his career that was not politically motivated. His book, *The Wars of Watergate: The Last Crisis of Richard Nixon*, charges that Nixon unnecessarily prolonged the Vietnam War, imperiled the democratic process to ensure his reelection, and implemented domestic reforms only when he could use them to outflank his liberal opponents.

Joan Hoff, in contrast, offers a more positive evaluation of the Nixon presidency in her book *Nixon Reconsidered*. She instead places Nixon in the context of the late 1960s and early 1970s, when support for big government, the New Deal, and the Great Society had begun to fade and the bipartisan, anti-communist foreign policy consensus of the Cold War had been shattered by Vietnam. While she agrees with Kutler about Nixon's limited foreign policy successes and the significance of the Watergate scandal, Hoff considers Nixon's greatest achievements — such as his environmental policies and record on civil rights — to be in the domestic realm. She also points out that, although Nixon was a political conservative, the welfare state in fact grew during his presidency. Hoff asks us to forget about his motives and to look instead at the results of his administrations.

Finally, Stephen Ambrose, in his three-volume Nixon biography, agrees with Hoff's evaluation of the Nixon administration's domestic successes, although he bases his positive evaluation of Nixon's presidency on Nixon's foreign policy initiatives. In

the second volume of the biography, *Nixon: The Triumph of a Politician, 1962-1972* (1989), Ambrose concludes that the president was without peer in the area of foreign relations.

Kutler, Hoff, and Ambrose represent three differing perspectives on the Nixon years. The debate over Nixon's legacy, however, will not stop with their analyses, as each successive generation of scholars reshapes the nature of the legacies left by American presidents.