

American History: Nixon's the One



President Richard Nixon in the White House a few weeks after his inauguration in 1969

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STEVE EMBER: Welcome to THE MAKING OF A NATION – American history in VOA Special English. I'm Steve Ember.

This week in our series, we begin the story of America's thirty-seventh president.

RICHARD NIXON: "I, Richard Milhous Nixon, do solemnly swear ... "

CHIEF JUSTICE EARL WARREN: "That you will faithfully execute the office ... "

RICHARD NIXON: "That I will faithfully execute the office ... "

CHIEF JUSTICE EARL WARREN: "Of president of the United States ... "

RICHARD NIXON: "Of president of the United States ... "

Richard Nixon was sworn into office on January twentieth, nineteen sixty-nine.

(MUSIC)

Nixon began his presidency at a difficult time.

(SOUND: Vietnam War)

American forces, allied with the Army of South Vietnam, were continuing to fight against the communist forces of North Vietnam. Thousands of soldiers and civilians were dying. The Americans and South Vietnamese were making little progress, and there were anti-war demonstrations in the United States.

ANTI-WAR PROTESTERS: "Hell no, we won't go!"



Demonstrators outside Chicago's Blackstone Hotel on February 5, 1970, to protest the visit of President Richard Nixon

There were also demonstrations against racial injustice. The issues that divided the nation also divided families and friends.

At the same time, fighting the war meant there was less government money available to fight social problems.

The last president, Lyndon Johnson, had proposed new legislation to help poor people and minorities. In some cases, Congress approved less money than he had requested. In other cases, lawmakers did not approve any money at all.

The new president seemed well prepared to deal with the difficulties of being president. He was known for his ability to fight, to lose, and to keep trying.

(MUSIC)

Richard Nixon was born in California. His family was poor. When he was about ten years old, he harvested vegetables to help earn money for his family. He

earned the money that he needed to go to college. Then he decided to study law. He was among the top students in his class.

During World War Two, Nixon served in the Navy in the Pacific. When he came home, he ran for a seat in Congress and won.

As a member of the House of Representatives, Nixon became known for his part in the Alger Hiss case.

RICHARD NIXON: "I am holding in my hand a microfilm of very highly confidential secret State Department documents. These documents were fed out of the State Department, over ten years ago, by communists who were employees of that department and who were interested in seeing if these documents were sent to the Soviet Union, where the interests of the Soviet Union happened to be in conflict with those of the United States."

(MUSIC)

Alger Hiss was a former official in the State Department. He had been accused of lying about helping provide secret information to the Soviet Union. He denied the accusations.

Nixon demanded a congressional investigation. Other members of the House thought the issue should be dropped. But Nixon succeeded and led the investigation.



AP

Alger Hiss before the House Un-American Activities Committee on August 25, 1948

While never convicted of espionage, Hiss was tried and found guilty of lying to a grand jury that investigated the case. He was sentenced to prison.

Some Americans disliked Richard Nixon for the way he treated people during the investigation. They felt that some of his attacks were unfair. At that time, fear of

communism was very strong. Critics thought he was using the situation for his own gain, to improve his political future.

In nineteen fifty, Richard Nixon ran for the Senate. Nixon, a Republican, competed against Democrat Helen Gahagan Douglas, a former actress and three-time California Congresswoman.

During the often bitter campaign he accused her of not recognizing the threat of communism in America.

He also said that she was "pink, right down to her underwear," a reference to her being sympathetic to communism.

In response, Congresswoman Douglas gave Nixon a nickname he would never completely lose, "Tricky Dick."

Nixon won the election.

(MUSIC)

Two years later, in nineteen fifty-two, the Republican Party chose him as its candidate for vice president. The candidate for president was Dwight Eisenhower.

Eisenhower and Nixon easily defeated the Democratic Party candidates, Illinois Governor Adlai Stevenson and Alabama Senator John Sparkman.

They won again in nineteen fifty-six.

During his eight years as vice president, Nixon visited sixty countries. He faced violent protests during a visit to South America in nineteen fifty-eight. The following year, he visited the Soviet Union. He and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev had what became known as the "kitchen debate." It took place in Moscow as they visited a model of a kitchen that might be found in an American house.

(SOUND: NIKITA KRUSHCHEV)

The debate was about world peace. Nixon at one point told Khrushchev that he did not know everything. But there were light moments as well.

RICHARD NIXON: "All that I can say from the way you talk, and the way you dominate the conversation, you would have made a good lawyer yourself."



AP

Vice President Nixon with President-elect John Kennedy in Miami, Florida, November 14, 1960

In nineteen sixty, Nixon accepted the Republican nomination for president. He had many years of political experience and had gained recognition as vice president. Many people thought he would win the national election easily. But he lost to the young John Kennedy. It was the closest presidential election since eighteen eighty-four.

After losing to Kennedy, Nixon moved back to California. Then in nineteen sixty-two he tried to defeat Governor Edmund "Pat" Brown, a Democrat, and lost.

In conceding defeat, Nixon gave a "final" press conference, in which he told reporters:

RICHARD NIXON: "For sixteen years, ever since the Hiss case, you've had a lot of fun. You've had an opportunity to attack me, and I think I've given as good as I've taken. I leave you gentlemen now, and you will now write it, you will interpret it, that's your right. But, as I leave you, I want you to know, just think how much you're going to be missing -- you don't have Nixon to kick around anymore."

Nixon's political career seemed to be over. He moved to New York City and worked as a lawyer. But he made it clear that he was not ruling out a return to public life at some point in the future.

(MUSIC)

Many Republicans began to see Richard Nixon as the statesman they wanted in the White House. By then, President Johnson had decided not to run for re-election in nineteen sixty-eight. His Democratic Party was divided. The Republicans believed they had a good chance to win the election.

Nixon campaigned hard against the Democratic candidate, Hubert Humphrey. Humphrey was vice president under Johnson and had to defend the president's unpopular policies on the Vietnam War.

Some Americans thought the war should be expanded. Many others demanded an immediate withdrawal.

Both Humphrey and Nixon promised to work for peace in Vietnam.

(MUSIC)

On Election Day, voters chose Nixon. He narrowly won the popular vote but collected many more electoral votes than Humphrey.

On the day after his victory, Richard Nixon spoke to a gathering of supporters. He told them that "the great objective" of his administration, from the start, would be "to bring the American people together."

(MUSIC)

Once in office, President Nixon proposed legislation to deal with problems at home. He called his proposals the "New Federalism." One proposal was for revenue sharing. Under his plan, the federal government would share tax money with state and local governments. For three years, Congress objected. Then, in nineteen seventy-two, the revenue sharing plan was finally approved.

Lawmakers also approved legislation for some of Nixon's other ideas. One changed the way American men were drafted into military service for the war. The new law said young men would now have their names chosen in a lottery system. Many people had criticized the earlier system which they said chose too many poor people and racial minorities. These were the men who were fighting, and dying, in Vietnam.

Congress also approved a change to the Constitution to decrease the voting age from twenty-one to eighteen. Supporters of the amendment said if people were old enough to fight and die in war, then they were old enough to vote. The amendment became law when three-fourths of the states approved it in nineteen seventy-one.

On another issue, Nixon proposed to build a system to defend against missile attacks. He said it was needed to protect American missile bases. Congress approved the idea in nineteen sixty-nine. Critics said it would only intensify the arms race with the Soviet Union.

(MUSIC)

Nixon's first appointments to the nation's highest court also caused much debate. He named two conservative judges from the South, Clement Haynsworth and G. Harold Carswell. Lawmakers said Haynsworth had been unfair to blacks in his decisions and that Carswell was not prepared for the job. Congress rejected both nominations to the Supreme Court.

President Nixon faced these disappointments, and others. But he still had moments to celebrate during his first term. One came on July twentieth, nineteen sixty-nine. On that day, he and millions of people around the world watched as two American astronauts became the first humans to land on the moon.

RICHARD NIXON: "Hello Neil and Buzz. I'm talking to you by telephone from the Oval Room at the White House. I just can't tell you how proud we all are. Because of what you have done, the heavens have become part of man's world. And, as you talk to us from the Sea of Tranquility, it inspires us to redouble our efforts to bring peace and tranquility to Earth."

(MUSIC)

We continue the story of Richard Nixon next week.

You can find our series online with transcripts, MP3s, podcasts and pictures at voaspecialenglish.com. You can also follow us on Facebook and Twitter at VOA Learning English. I'm Steve Ember, inviting you to join us again next week for THE MAKING OF A NATION -- American history in VOA Special English.

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