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Nixon Now and Then: Shifting Perceptions

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Abstract

This article examines how the global and domestic perceptions of Richard Nixon have evolved between his time in office and 2016. One of the main themes of this study is how the Watergate scandal and Nixon's resignation impacted the American political scene. Using scholarly works as well as contemporary media sources as a basis for analysis, I argue that Nixon's legacy is as complicated as his presidency. In the United States, Nixon is still viewed as a political villain who placed a stain on the American political process. However, in other countries, such as China, Nixon is viewed as a tremendously successful president. This study seeks to explain why the global perception of Nixon and his presidency is still so contentious.

Keywords

Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, Media, Watergate, China

Geçmişte ve Günümüzde Nixon: Değişen Algılar

Özet

Bu makale, başkanlık döneminden 2016 yılına kadar Amerika'da ve dünyada değişen Richard Nixon algısını incelemektedir. Çalışmanın ana temalarında biri, Watergate Skandalı ve Nixon'ın istifasının

Amerikan politik sahnesinde yarattığı etkidir. Akademik çalışmalar ve güncel medya kaynaklarını bu analizin dayanağı olarak kullanan bu çalışma, Nixon'ın siyasi mirasının başkanlık dönemi kadar karmaşık olduğunu savunur. Bugün Amerika Birleşik Devletleri'nde Nixon halen Amerikan'ın politik işleyişine leke sürmüş siyasi bir hain olarak gösterilir. Buna rağmen, Çin gibi başka ülkelerde, son derece başarılı bir başkan olarak görülür. Bu çalışma, küresel düzlemde Nixon algısının ve Nixon'ın başkanlık döneminin neden hala bir tartışma konusu olduğunu açıklamayı amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler

Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, Medya, Watergate Skandalı, Çin

It has been some twenty years since President Richard Nixon's death and some forty years have passed since his helicopter lifted off from the White House lawn, carrying this figure away from the office from which he had just resigned. Also more than four decades ago, President Gerald Ford controversially pardoned his disgraced predecessor, ostensibly so that the nation could heal and move forward. However, many would argue that the shadow of Nixon lingers darkly over not just American politics, but American society, and US foreign affairs. Nixon often appears in contemporary media outlets, usually serving as an unflattering comparison in a criticism of a current politician. Additionally, the media is still analyzing the effect that Nixon has on current events. For example, in September 2014, *Salon* magazine offered its readers an analysis of the catastrophic effect of Watergate. The headline blared, "Watergate's Most Lasting Sin: Gerald Ford, Richard Nixon, and the Pardon That Made Us All Cynics." The subheading is even more damning: "Ford let Nixon off 40 years ago today. That launched Iran-Contra, 'too big to fail'—and proved power trumps law." The article argues that the precedent set by the pardon set the stage for many of the problems of the late twentieth century (Perlstein). Whether or not this is necessarily true is to be determined by legal scholars and historians. But it offers a good starting point for several questions surrounding Nixon.

What is the global perception of Richard Nixon? How has that perception shifted over time? This article examines perceptions of Nixon's presidency from the time of his resignation to the present. A major question to be addressed is whether or not Watergate still

overshadows all of Nixon's other actions—and achievements—while in office. It is essential to put the evaluation of Nixon into proper historical context. For instance, were evaluations less harsh once the Cold War was over? In order to evaluate these perceptions, it is useful to look at several key factors that offer insight to this topic: media portrayal, scholarly assessments, and public opinion. It is also useful to consider Nixon's own efforts to manage his historical legacy. When looking at each of these elements, it becomes clear that Nixon's legacy is as controversial as his tumultuous political career.

The media's role in Nixon's resignation has been well-documented, with the *Washington Post* reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein having become household names. The media of the following decades have also shown an interest in investigating Nixon, trying to figure out what his legacy and his lasting impact have been. The fortieth anniversary of Nixon's pardon provided an excellent opportunity to assess how portrayals and perceptions of Nixon have shifted. At the time of the pardon, the majority of Americans were strongly against such action, believing Nixon should be severely punished. President Ford died believing that he had done the right thing for the nation, and now many scholars and journalists are agreeing that Ford was indeed correct. For example, a headline in the *Wall Street Journal* declared: "The Nixon Pardon at 40: Ford Looks Better Than Ever." The authors of that article strongly contend that avoiding a Nixon trial was the right thing for the nation, and note that without the pardon, Ford would not have been able to keep essential historical documents in the White House—and therefore prevented them from being destroyed by the Nixon camp. However, the article does not try to defend Nixon; it simply argues that the fallout from Watergate did not permanently damage the American political psyche (Gordon and Shribman). This article brings to light an important component in gauging Nixon's legacy—that it is inextricably linked with Gerald Ford's legacy, and many other people and events.

The memory of Nixon is also used to serve as an indicator of current political moods. There are many recent articles that compare twenty-first century figures to Nixon, such as Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel and New Jersey Governor Chris Christie. These comparisons are used to portray these figures in unflattering light and to point out their flaws to the public. Such comparisons in the media are rarely favorable. Nixon's shame has also recently been used as a tool to demonstrate current public distrust of the government, with headlines

such as, “Trust in Government Lowest Since Nixon Era, Poll Shows.” The Gallup Organization reported that only 43 percent of Americans trust the executive branch of the government (Condon). Even though many readers of this report were not alive during the Nixon era, the connotation is understood by most.

Using Nixon as a synonym for law-breaking has become so ubiquitous that it even occurs in stories relating not to politics, but to sports. In the fall of 2014, there was a public outcry when a video was released of National Football League player Ray Rice physically abusing his fiancé. The NFL received significant criticism for not imposing harsher penalties on players who commit acts of domestic violence, and the league’s commissioner, Roger Goodell, received the brunt of the anger. Several journalists compared Goodell’s handling of the case to Nixon-level corruption, comparing the two by saying they both believed they were above the reaches of the law (Dowd). Certainly, corruption in the government is a more substantive problem than the suggestion of corruption in professional sports. However, Dowd’s point brings the issue of Nixon’s legacy to the forefront of the minds of a demographic that is not always involved in the debate over problems in politics.

The spate of news stories related to the fortieth anniversary of the resignation and pardon took many different angles and offered disparate assessment of Nixon’s impact. However, they all tended to focus on Watergate. Nixon himself certainly would have been furious, as he wanted to be judged by the totality of his actions and what he saw as his great achievements. Indeed, when President Bill Clinton spoke at Nixon’s funeral, he urged people to “remember President Nixon’s life in totality” (W. Clinton). Unquestionably, there was much more to Nixon’s life than Watergate and the resulting political fallout. When assessing perceptions of Nixon, it is critical to widen the scope and see if the public and the media have found the capacity to consider President Clinton’s words.

The foreign press also spent time evaluating Nixon’s impact. Opinion in England seems to match the mood in America—that Nixon’s crimes were unpardonable. The headline in a recent 2014 article in *The Guardian* proclaimed, “Richard Nixon at 100: Not Just Criminal but Treasonous, Too.” The author examined Nixon’s duplicitous back channel diplomacy during the 1968 election. He cautions the public of the story, “It’s a worthwhile reminder that if one were ever moved to

give Richard Nixon the benefit of the doubt, the urge must be resisted” (Cohen). In a previous article covering the release of the latest Nixon tapes, *The Guardian* declared that the new evidence reconfirmed the public view of Nixon: “as a lying, venal, foul-mouthed, paranoid conspirator” (Glaistner).

In honor of another significant fortieth anniversary, many scholars and statesmen attempted to redirect the conversation. In 2012, the focus on Nixon revolved around his historic trip to China. Many used this as a way to point the focus to another critical aspect of his presidency—foreign policy. The U.S. Institute of Peace (USIP) hosted a gathering of policymakers from the U.S. and China to analyze the history and the current state of the complicated relationship between the two countries. The symposium, which was co-sponsored by the Richard Nixon Foundation, was named “The Week That Changed The World,” indicating the importance that Nixon’s China trip had on shaping global affairs. This conference, which included talks by statesmen, scholars, and journalists, provides excellent insight into how global perceptions of Nixon have formed in relation to foreign policy.

Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi addressed the conference via video link, providing China’s view of the lasting impact of Nixon’s trip. He stated, “Forty years ago, Nixon paid a historic visit to China, during which our two countries issued the epoch-making Shanghai Communique. With extraordinary strategic vision and political wisdom, the Chinese and American leaders broke the ice of estrangement between China and the United States and opened a new chapter in our bilateral relations.” The foreign minister offered other praise for Nixon’s actions, and argued that this meeting paved the way for a positive evolution of U.S.-China relations (Yang).

Of course, given the setting, Yang’s warm remarks may not seem that remarkable. However, his glowing assessment of Nixon largely mirrors opinion in China—then, and now, most Chinese have a very favorable impression of Nixon, based on his handling of foreign affairs. Both the political elite and the general population did not understand why Watergate was such a big problem for Nixon, and certainly could not understand his being forced to leave office over the event. In the twenty-first century, the perception of Nixon in China has not been tainted. Still, the overwhelming view is that Watergate was a minor issue of little significance compared to his diplomatic efforts

with China. Indeed, Chinese diplomats much preferred dealing with Nixon and Kissinger to dealing with other American officials. In the early days after Watergate, there was great consternation in the Chinese foreign ministry about whether or not all the agreements they had made with Nixon would be honored by his successors. Kissinger did much behind-the-scenes communicating to reassure the Chinese that the relationship would continue to move forward. However, the view in China was that that did not occur until Jimmy Carter took office in 1977. The Chinese leadership signaled their clear preference for Nixon when they invited him to make a return visit to China in 1976. This was an obvious indicator that the Chinese perception of Nixon was, and has remained, favorable (T.P.).

At that same 2012 symposium in China, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton gave a keynote address, agreeing that Nixon's China visit was of historic significance. She spoke as not only a diplomat, but as someone who lived through—and keenly observed—Nixon's tenure. In her remarks, Clinton praised Nixon, his team, and their Chinese counterparts for the diplomatic risks that they took. After noting the many highpoints of the U.S.-China relationship over the past forty years, she encouraged the listening dignitaries, "So let us remember and take inspiration from how far apart our countries were when President Nixon landed in Beijing and how much we have accomplished together since then. It is irrefutable proof of the progress that is possible when people work together to overcome their differences and find common ground not only for their own good but for others'. It is now up to us to make sure that the future is even more promising than the past" (H. Clinton). There was no mention of Watergate or its shadow in Secretary Clinton's remarks.

Certainly, Nixon himself would have been gratified that his foreign policy, specifically China, was the focus of this conference, and of the many news outlets that covered the anniversary of the historic trip. As evidenced by his six books, including his memoirs and *Six Crises*, Nixon strongly believed that his presidency should be evaluated on the basis of his foreign policy achievements, not on Watergate. In addition to writing his memoirs, Nixon and his team decided that they would be better able to reach a mass audience by utilizing television. Nixon agreed to a series of interviews with British journalist David Frost, in an attempt to gain sympathy from the public and rehabilitate his reputation. The Frost/Nixon interviews gained

enormous attention when they aired in 1977. Nixon was able to discuss what he considered his greatest achievements—China and Vietnam—making it clear that he felt he had excelled at managing foreign affairs. But a significant portion of the interview also focused on Watergate, with Frost becoming the first person to, in effect, “cross-examine” the former president. Frost recalled that the first day of interviews on Watergate was a “disaster.” Nixon stonewalled him with each answer. On the second day, Nixon was more forthcoming, and Frost imagined that he had realized he needed to talk in order to be forgiven (Frost 4). Although the interviews succeeded in gaining Nixon much wanted attention (and income, as he was paid \$600,000 plus some royalties), it did not garner the sympathy or forgiveness that he so yearned for. The overwhelming majority of Americans still believed that he was guilty of a crime, and the overwhelming majority believed that he should no longer be a public figure.

On the tenth anniversary of his resignation, the media portrayed him as having made significant progress on his road to rehabilitation. His memoirs, while often poorly reviewed, had done well in sales. His trip to China had made him an international figure again. He regularly offered advice to President Ronald Reagan on foreign affairs, and made speeches before less hostile audiences. However, as the *New York Times* reported, Nixon appeared unchanged to many. Nixon was still hostile and defensive about the subject of Watergate, which still tainted his legacy. And although many leaders asked for his advice on international relations, they were reluctant for that to be public knowledge (Herbers).

A decade later, Nixon’s death sparked another resurgence of media assessments of him. News outlets around the world reached out to dignitaries for comments on the former president’s legacy. Most, such as U.S. Senator Bob Dole and President Clinton, urged the public to consider the whole of Nixon’s presidency and actions after leaving office, rather than focusing on Watergate. But Watergate was mentioned in nearly all accounts. Former Nixon Chief of Staff Alexander Haig offered a typical view of the shaping of Nixon’s legacy: “His influence in foreign affairs at the time of his death was still such that every President and world leader sought him out. He was a great man and he will be a role model for generations to come in the way he bounced back from adversity. Time will tell about Richard Nixon” (Ayers).

Scholars have been an integral component of telling the story of

Richard Nixon. From the days immediately following the resignation to the present, historians and political scientists have joined the media in attempting to portray not just his actions, but in attempting to shape his historical legacy. An overview of the literature on the Nixon presidency is crucial to understanding the global perceptions of him. As could be expected, many of the early evaluations of Nixon seemed to lack objectivity. Even before the resignation, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., in *The Imperial Presidency*, displayed open hostility towards Nixon, based on the still evolving Watergate scandal (417). Although many readers surely agreed with Schlesinger's charges of egregious abuse of power, the author's overall purpose was tainted by partisan bias.

Other historians, such as Theodore White, argued that Nixon was a tragic, flawed, Shakespearian-type hero. In *Breach of Faith: The Fall of Richard Nixon*, White argued that Nixon was a powerful man who succumbed to the crushing powers of his office; it was political changes that forced Nixon to crumble under the weight of his duties. One of the first scholars to attempt to psychoanalyze Nixon, White comes to the conclusion that some of Nixon's personality traits (paranoia) kept him from being the great leader that he could have been (335). This work seems to have had little impact on the perceptions of Nixon; in 1975, America was still reeling from the pardon. White's portrayal of Nixon as a tragic hero did not resonate with the general public.

Although Watergate was still Nixon's greatest legacy to the majority of Americans in the late 1970s, scholars began to focus on other long-term impacts of the Nixon administration. William E. Porter argued that Nixon had done serious damage to the free press. In *Assault on the Media: The Nixon Years*, Porter theorized that Nixon believed that the media were his enemies, and instructed his staff to act accordingly. Porter's main concern was that Nixon's belief that the media existed to support the government would plague the nation's press, as it placed their First Amendment rights under threat (36). Porter raised some interesting concerns, but it should be noted that a large portion of the historical documents relating to Nixon had not yet been declassified. Also, two years after Watergate was too soon to attempt to define exactly what damage had been caused by Nixon's toxic relationship with the media. More analysis would be useful in determining what, if any, impact occurred.

By the 1980s, Americans were entering a new era—they were

ready to move forward from the social changes of the previous decade, and they were ready to embrace Reagan's plans for fixing the economy and winning the Cold War. However, Nixon was still a topic of great interest to scholars, the media, and the public. One of the current trends in studying the Nixon era was to focus on the character of the man himself. Fawn N. Brodie's work, *Richard Nixon: The Shaping of his Character*, was one of the most significant works in the still early historiography of Nixon. Brodie, largely relying on personal interviews, attempted to analyze events in Nixon's life that shaped his character and paved the way for his political downfall. By 1974, Brodie argues, Nixon was suffering from severe mental illness (17). Brodie's argument was fairly persuasive, and more people began to take her analysis into account in their evaluation of Nixon. This shift marks an interesting point in the history of the rehabilitation of Nixon by raising certain questions. On one hand, if people believed that Nixon suffered from a mental illness, they might be more likely to forgive his sins. Perhaps this is one way that he could be rehabilitated. On the other hand, the more people who believed he was mentally ill, the less people would approve of him reentering public life, such as an advisor to Reagan. The decade after his resignation saw shifting perceptions of Nixon, and demonstrated that the public was not yet ready to cast a final judgment.

During the 1980s and early 1990s, Nixon continued to try to rehabilitate his image, often focusing on cultivating the perception of a wise counselor to leaders on foreign affairs. He traveled abroad frequently, making trips to many countries in Europe, Japan, China, the Soviet Union, and the Middle East. Nixon was welcomed in each of those countries, and spent time with government officials and members of the public. Many international leaders claimed that they still did not understand Nixon's forced retirement from politics (Updegrove 103). The global perception of Nixon continued to mainly be one of respect for his accomplishments in international relations. In the United States, Watergate was still a shadow cast over those achievements, but the reviled figure had indeed made remarkable progress in his road to rehabilitation.

By the 1990s, a group of scholars began producing revisionist works on Nixon—books that celebrated his strengths, rather than focusing on his faults. Herbert S. Parmet, arguing that due to bias previous historians had not treated Nixon fairly, attempted to tell a different story in *Richard Nixon and His America*. Essentially, Parmet

contended that Nixon did not shape events, but merely reacted to them. All of his actions were intended to align with the public mood. Although Parmet attempts objectivity, he seemingly goes too far in his portrayal of Nixon as a man who was never opportunistic. Indeed, Watergate receives a scant three pages in this work that is more than six hundred pages (Parmet 263).

Tom Wicker, a journalist who covered the Nixon presidency, attempted another fresh explanation of the man with *One of Us: Richard Nixon and the American Dream*. Wicker argues that Nixon's political skill was of greater importance than his character. Wicker actually achieves some objectivity, and makes many plausible arguments. Perhaps the book's greatest contribution to the perception of image is the contention that Nixon's character should not be the central factor in evaluating his historical legacy (Wicker xi). The early 1990s offered other attempts at a more balanced view of Nixon. In *Nixon: The Triumph of a Politician, 1962-1972*, Stephen Ambrose recognizes Nixon's skill as a politician (an unskilled politician would be very unlikely to be nominated for president three times), but argues that he was corrupt and unnecessarily ruthless. He focuses on Nixon's obsession with communism, which was likely an interesting theme for his readers witnessing the end of the Cold War. Ambrose devotes a significant portion of his book to Watergate, and while he offers little new information, he draws the logical conclusion that Nixon deserved to be punished and is possibly undeserving of rehabilitation (661).

Of course, most historians were convinced that Watergate *was* the central issue of the Nixon era. With *The Wars of Watergate: The Last Crisis of Richard Nixon*, Stanley I. Kutler offered the first monograph written by an historian devoted entirely to Watergate. For Kutler, Watergate was the central feature of Nixon's entire presidency, and seems to suggest that it should be the central feature of his legacy. Kutler persuasively argues that Watergate made an impact on the ideology of American politics, and changed the way the public viewed the media and the right to government information (xiii). A decade later, as another anniversary of the Watergate investigation approached, historians attempted to use the increasingly broad historical record to shed new light on the scandal. Although there was not a lot of "new" information, scholars had time on their side: they were now more than ten years past the end of the Cold War and able to provide some new context to Watergate and Nixon. One of the most successful of these

attempts was Keith W. Olson's *Watergate: The Presidential Scandal that Shook America*. Olson examines Watergate through the lens of the Cold War, an era in which government fear of dissent was rampant. Olson makes no excuses for Nixon, but instead portrays him as a product of his time and environment (168).

In recent years, scholars have attempted to focus on Nixon's oft overlooked domestic policies as a new way to assess his legacy. This trend has led to more tightly focused narratives that are void of the emotions that Watergate still seems to stir. In *Nixon and the Environment*, J. Brooks Flippen argues that Nixon did as much for the environment as almost any other twentieth-century president. Certainly, Flippen admits, Nixon was no great lover of the earth—his actions were completely motivated by political gain. Whatever the reasons, Nixon did make great contributions to preserving the environment by signing executive orders such as the one that established the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) (Flippen 231). Another focused monograph by Kevin L. Yuill explores Nixon's role in expanding affirmative action. Yuill contributes to the historiography by contending that despite his own racial prejudices, Nixon reopened the conversation on racial politics in America (Yuill 117). Works such as Flippen's and Yuill's will certainly have an impact on the global perceptions of Nixon, because they shift the topic of conversation to his actions other than Watergate.

As Nixon wanted, scholars have often chosen to examine his legacy in terms of his foreign policy achievements. There are numerous works devoted to Nixon's handling of détente, China, and Vietnam. In *Nixon's Vietnam War*, Jeffrey Kimball introduces readers to "the madman theory," which is the idea that Nixon tried to bring the North Vietnamese to the bargaining table by making them believe he was mentally unstable. Kimball laboriously traces Nixon and Kissinger's diplomacy, faulting them for viewing the conflict in Vietnam as more global than local. Despite criticisms, Kimball seems to side with those who argue that Nixon's entire legacy should not revolve around Watergate (76).

As archival materials continue to be made available, scholars have made great use of sources such as transcripts of telephone conversations. Robert Dallek, in his book *Nixon and Kissinger: Partners in Power*, argues that Nixon and Kissinger's dysfunctional relationship had a significant impact on the crafting of American foreign policy. He

contends that both were deceitful, insecure, and paranoid, which led to many unconventional decisions (Dallek xii). *Nixon and Kissinger* is an important contribution to the study of Nixon's legacy, as it devotes considerable analysis to Nixon's personality traits and how they impacted both foreign and domestic politics.

Perceptions of Nixon have shifted over the past forty years, as demonstrated by the changing narratives put forth by scholars and the media. The Richard Nixon Library and Presidential Museum has also begun to reevaluate exactly how Nixon and his legacy should be portrayed. A major change occurred when that entity became part of the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA). Now entrusted with controlling the vast array of Nixon documents, the Nixon Library has adopted a new policy of open access to the archival collections—both in the library and online. Additionally, the museum is making significant changes to its exhibits. Prior to recent years, the museum was often considered to be full of partisan exhibits, lacking in both the proper historical context and information. Now, images are displayed with better, more objective explanations of the events they depict (Haughey 162). The exhibit on Watergate, for instance, has been totally redone.

What does it mean that the Nixon Library is reevaluating its portrayal of Nixon? It means that the Library is in tune with the global perceptions of Nixon—namely, that his story is still evolving. For Americans, the shadow of Watergate still looms large. But the public is gradually accepting less harsh views of the former president, and accepting that there were some definite positive changes that occurred in the Nixon era. For citizens of other countries, the perception of Nixon is less fluid. He remains best known and respected for his role in détente and the opening of relations with China. There is no fixed global perception of Richard Nixon. The one thing that remains certain is that in death, as in life, he serves as a fascinating character who left a controversial legacy for both the United States and the world.

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