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Interview: Richard Nixon and the Verdict of History

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Abstract

Joan Hoff, currently Research Professor of History at Montana State University, is a recognized expert on the modern American presidency. She has served as president and CEO of the Center for the Study of the President as well as executive director of the Organization of American Historians (OAH). Hoff's 1994 acclaimed work, *Nixon Reconsidered*, argues that Nixon should primarily be remembered for his domestic policies with less stress on foreign affairs and even Watergate. This interview was conducted by Roger Chapman in November 2015.

Keywords

Richard Nixon, Watergate, Mark Felt, US Presidents

Röportaj: Richard Nixon ve Tarihin Hükümü

Özet

Halen Montana Eyalet Üniversitesi'nde Tarih Bölümü'nde Araştırmacı Profesör olarak görev yapan Joan Hoff, modern Amerikan devlet başkanlığı alanında tanınmış bir uzmandır. Hoff, Başkan Çalışmaları Merkezi'nde genel müdür ve yönetim kurulu başkanı olarak çalışmış olmanın yanı sıra, Amerikan Tarihçileri Birliği'nin (ATB) yetkili müdürü olarak da hizmet vermiştir. 1994 yılında yazdığı

ve geniş ölçüde takdir toplayan çalışması, *Nixon'ı Yeniden Ele Almak*, Nixon'ın dış politikasına ve hatta Watergate Skandalı'na bile daha az vurgu yapılarak, asıl olarak iç siyasetiyle anılması gerektiğini iddia etmektedir. Bu röportaj Roger Chapman tarafından 2015 yılının Kasım ayında gerçekleştirilmiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler

Richard Nixon, Watergate Skandalı, Mark Felt, Amerikan Devlet Başkanları

Q: At Richard Nixon's funeral President Bill Clinton declared, "Today is a day for his family, his friends, and his nation to remember President Nixon's life in totality ... may the day of judging President Nixon on anything less than his entire life and career come to an end." How do you regard Clinton's statement?

JH: Clinton was talking about himself, as usual. Despite his extreme popularity today, historians such as myself [*Faustian Foreign Policy*] have criticized his vacillating foreign policy while progressive reformers have tried with varying success to undo many of his conservative domestic policies because of their unintended consequences—such as “don't ask, don't tell”; deregulation; draconian welfare reform; abortion that should be “legal, safe, and rare” when the Supreme Court had declared it a “fundamental right”; excessive drug penalties; and “three-strikes-you're-out” (the mandatory sentences resulting in massive incarceration). Hillary Clinton in her campaign for the U.S. presidency has had to distance herself from many of these policies in order to appear more liberal than he or she was in the 1990s.

Q: Has your view of Nixon evolved over time or has it more or less remained fixed?

JH: Since I was the first historian to document Nixon's liberal domestic policies, I stand by that interpretation. I am surprised, however, that the various revisionist studies of him, such as mine, have essentially been ignored by current historians writing standard, anti-Nixon, Watergate accounts. Despite my book [*Nixon Reconsidered*], most TV pundits and TV documentaries and plays about him still stress Watergate.

This is despite such revisionist books as Parmet, *Richard Nixon and His America*; Wicker, *One of Us*; Colodny and Gettlin, *Silent Coup*; Matusow, *Nixon's Economy*; Terriff, *The Nixon Administration and the Making of US Nuclear Strategy*; Holland, *Leak*; Burr and Kimball, *Nixon's Nuclear Specter*; Weiner, *One Man Against the World*; Locker, *Nixon's Gamble*; Rosen, *The Strong Man*; and Nichter, *Richard Nixon and Europe*.

Q: Had Watergate never happened, how would historians be remembering Nixon and where would they be ranking him among the presidents?

JH: Given his liberal domestic policies and innovative foreign policy with respect to China and the Soviet Union (basically abandoning Cold War containment), I think he would rank among the near-great presidents or higher had he simply denounced the Watergate break-ins rather than try to cover them up.

Without Watergate and the “stagflation” caused by the impact of the Vietnam War on the economy, Jimmy Carter would not have been president because he could not have waged a “moral campaign” against the crimes of Watergate. Then, with the perceived “failure” of the Carter administration, the 1980s came to be dominated by fundamentalism, neo-conservatism, and Reaganism. In essence, the Watergate scandal perverted what should have been a fairly progressive period of conservatism following the end of the war in Vietnam into a regressive one under Ronald Reagan.

Q: What do you say to the person who thinks Nixon is no different than most other politicians except he happened to get caught?

JH: It is true that Nixon got caught but questionable, if not actually criminal actions, on the part of American presidents at home and abroad did not start nor end with Nixon.

What is more troubling, however, is that the investigation of Watergate did not put an end to the problems of presidential accountability and the public's access to information [about the government]. This has plagued the U.S. political and legal systems before and after Watergate. Thus, Reagan walked away unscathed by the Iran-Contra fiasco because his staff provided him with “plausible deniability” when an unconstitutional shadow government within the National Security Council carried out illegal covert actions. Likewise, President Bush and

his closest advisers have not been held accountable for lying the country into the Iraq War and violating domestic and international laws, to say nothing of the abuses of civil and human rights. Both these post-Nixon presidential actions were much more unconstitutional than Watergate. Instead, the fact that Reagan and Bush were not held responsible verified the idea that there is a two-level system of accountability and justice in the United States—one for top government officials and one for everyone else. Former U.S. Representative Elizabeth Holtzman, who voted to impeach Nixon, recently said: “Neither Congress nor the courts have taken the Watergate example to heart and stood firmly against presidential crimes or serious misconduct.”

Q: Some are saying that Nixon was one of the last liberal presidents. Do you agree?

JH: There is no doubt his progressive domestic initiatives were more liberal than any president since FDR and until Barrack Obama. He pursued reform in five areas: welfare, civil rights (including not only desegregation of Southern schools and voting rights, but also additional rights for women and Native Americans), economic and environmental policy, and reorganization of the federal bureaucracy. His domestic achievements were more long-lasting than his dramatic opening of relations with China and the Soviet Union, especially after the end of the Cold War.

For example, Nixon personally insisted that Congress broaden the U.S. Civil Rights Commission mandate to include sex discrimination; and as president he signed all congressional civil rights legislation passed by Congress, including Title IX which banned sexual discrimination in educational benefits. Most important, the Nixon administration expanded enforcement of affirmative action. He also supported the Constitutional amendment lowering the voting age to eighteen and he ended the draft.

Nixon also used the “peace dividend” from reducing troops in Vietnam to support funding for social welfare services and for enforcement of civil rights through the Economic Equal Opportunity Commission [EEOC]. As a result, from 1970 to 1975 spending on human resource service programs exceeded spending for defense for the first time since WWII and through the enhanced food stamp program Nixon remains the only president to have ended hunger in the United States while in office.

Q: John Morton Blum, as you know, wrote an influential biography on Theodore Roosevelt, which largely changed the public perception of that president. Prior to Blum's *The Republican Roosevelt*, many regarded TR as an adolescent type of figure and hardly a worthwhile president. What is the chance Nixon will have his Blum?

JH: The chance is not very good. My book should have sparked further research on Nixon's domestic, as well as his foreign, policies. His civil rights record has been elaborated upon in Dean J. Kotlowski's *Nixon's Civil Rights*. Otherwise, most books have not credited his reforms in any detail including the latest biography by Evan Thomas, *Being Nixon*, which devotes fewer than a dozen pages out of over five hundred to Nixon's progressive domestic achievements. Most historians, political scientists, and journalists such as Thomas have concentrated on his character and come to pseudo-psychological conclusions about his personality flaws.

The other reason for lack of a serious academic re-evaluation of Nixon has been the writings of Woodward and Bernstein—but especially Woodward, in collaboration with John Dean [*Blind Ambition*] and the late historian Stanley I. Kutler [*Abuse of Power*]. They have perpetuated over the years the myth of a single Deep Throat leaker, the standard interpretation of the Watergate break-ins on May 28 and June 17 as examples of attempts at political espionage on the part of the Nixon administration without adequate documentation, and praise for Dean's performance during the Watergate hearings. Politicians and journalists of the left and right have accepted these myths ever since in part because Dean has successfully avoided being confronted by the contradictions and inconsistencies in his original, under-oath Watergate testimony before Congress by suing authors, including Colodny and me, who suggested he had more to do with the Watergate break-ins than he has publicly admitted. Most significantly, the list of relevant tapes Dean prepared for the special prosecutor consisted of a bare bones outline which cast him in the most positive light.

Moreover, Dean's alliance with Woodward, has given them, as consultants, a virtual monopoly over media representations of Watergate since the 1970s, including the 1994 ABC/BBC documentary, and all of the discussions since 1999 on network or cable TV every time the resignation of the anniversary of Nixon's resignation comes up.

Q: Is there any research topic on Nixon that has not been

adequately explored? What more needs to be done to sharpen our understanding of Nixon and his legacy?

JH: Most importantly, there has not been a single or multi-volume study evaluating all of Nixon's foreign policies—both good and bad. My book [*Faustian Foreign Policy*] only provided a summary of his international activities. Instead, Nixon's individual diplomatic and military actions have been singled out for narrow criticism.

Additionally, we still do not know why the Watergate break-ins took place or solved the mystery of Deep Throat. In all likelihood, Deep Throat was a literary conceit invented to cover-up the fact that they obtained information from several informants. More telling perhaps is that there was no Deep Throat character in the original proposal for *All the President's Men* that Woodward and Bernstein submitted to their then agent David Obst [*Too Good to Be Forgotten*]. Apparently this literary fiction appeared in the book manuscript only after Robert Redford met with Woodward about turning the story into a movie.

Q: But did not Mark Felt shortly before his death claim to be Deep Throat? Are you suggesting that the former acting FBI director was not Woodward's secret source?

JH: Woodward repeatedly said Deep Throat was alive and so those researching for the true identities of the composite Deep Throat ruled out, among others, anyone in the Nixon administration who had passed away like William C. Sullivan, head of the FBI's Domestic Intelligence Division. Sullivan died under mysterious circumstances in 1977. In 2005, Woodward named Mark Felt as Deep Throat [*The Secret Man*] after Felt, suffering from severe dementia, claimed through a family attorney that he was Deep Throat although he had denied this dubious honor for three decades when he was *compos mentis*. While Felt undoubtedly provided Woodward information, recent discrepancies in Woodward's book about Felt, then assistant FBI director, began to be revealed. This is especially true of authors like Ray Locker, [*Nixon's Gamble*], Max Holland [*Leak*], and a forthcoming book by Len Colodny. All three agree that Woodward's meetings with Sullivan carried more correct information about Watergate than Felt's, but each man also gave misleading information to the two reporters because they both were vying to become head of the FBI. Significantly, there is nothing in any of Woodward's "Deep Throat" notes deposited at the University of Texas, Austin that is directly traceable to Felt.

In all likelihood, Woodward and Bernstein made up the myth about a single source for their Watergate information, then promoted, along with Dean, a guessing game about who it was, and then Woodward finally revealed the name of a man no longer able to personally deny or acknowledge the truth. Thus, Deep Throat was (and remains) a perfect diversion from finding out the truth about Watergate and who has been covering up what ever since Nixon's initial cover-up. Consequently, Dean and Woodward and Bernstein will continue to be honored as "heroes" of Watergate. As long as this remains true, credible revisionist studies of Nixon and Watergate and other aspects of his administration will be ignored by mainstream historians and journalists who would rather cling to a comforting sense of political correctness about Nixon as the most corrupt, evil, and least accomplished president in history because of his personality defects.

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