

The 'Age of Nixon' Reconsidered

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Antoine Coppolani's masterful biography offers a carefully constructed account of Nixon's half-century at the centre of the American scene. The result is a compelling book that tells us much about the post-World War II years in the United States, as well as about Richard Nixon himself.

Reviewed: Antoine Coppolani, *Richard Nixon*. Paris: Fayard, 2013, 1184 p.

At home and overseas

'I believe the second half of the 20th century will be known as the age of Nixon.' At Richard Nixon's funeral in April 1994, Bob Dole, then the Senate minority leader, offered a eulogy that not only praised the former president's achievements, but also launched a concept that has subsequently informed historical study of his life (if usually employed to describe the three decades of his career in politics between the end of World War II and his Watergate-impelled resignation). In exploring this 'age of Nixon,' Antoine Coppolani's masterful biography offers a carefully constructed account of Nixon's half-century at the centre of the American scene. The result is a compelling book that tells us much about the post-World War II years in the United States, as well as about Richard Nixon himself.

For contemporaries, there was no leading politician more controversial than Nixon, who divided opinion sharply. Historical opinion has remained barely less divided, as Coppolani meticulously demonstrates; his book draws on an impressive array of primary material, but it is also grounded in an insightful analysis of the large scholarly literature on Nixon. Among the most influential contributions to this literature is Joan Hoff's *Nixon Reconsidered*. Published in the year of Nixon's death, Hoff's book transformed historical understanding of the disgraced president's accomplishments, arguing that the record in foreign policy was less significant than usually assumed, but his domestic achievements were much more impressive. Coppolani disagrees. His book persuasively, and with careful nuance, develops the case that the Nixon agenda as president was substantial and thoughtful both at home and overseas. For the first time since World War II, welfare spending eclipsed defence spending under Nixon – which tells us something important about Nixon's rather non-Republican preparedness to spend money on social problems as well as about the shift from war to peace, Coppolani notes.

The phoenix

The Cold War is at the heart of this biography. It is a leading character scarcely less central than Nixon himself. As Coppolani shows, the domestic anticommunism of the early Cold War – fearful of subversion, watchful for perceived softness toward the Soviet threat, sometimes neglectful of distinctions between Democratic liberals, European socialists, and Soviet communists – helped Nixon to achieve political prominence. If the aggression of his attacks on opponents earned him the tag ‘Tricky Dick’, Nixon’s domestic anticommunism was firmly within the political mainstream of the day. Then, as vice president during the Eisenhower years, Nixon worked assiduously to establish his credentials as a Cold War heavyweight, aware that foreign policy determined career success in American national politics during the post–World War II era, but also acutely conscious that no domestic question seemed nearly as consequential as superpower rivalries. The Cold War remained determinative to his *traversée du désert* between the 1960 and 1968 presidential elections.

First, John F. Kennedy outflanked him in 1960 on the Cold War; then, in the 1962 California gubernatorial contest, Nixon’s Cold War focus made the former vice president’s commitment to state affairs seem patchy and equivocal; finally, in 1968, the storm clouds of foreign-policy crisis in Vietnam were propitious for a Nixon candidacy. Coppolani’s chapter on Nixon as a ‘phoenix’ – achieving an electoral comeback of a scale matched by few American politicians – is an especially compelling account of ambition, calculation, contingency, and both good and bad fortune.

Nixon won the presidency at a time of considerable turbulence. The disastrous odyssey of the Vietnam War constituted the principal challenge that Nixon faced, and the quest for peace, more than anything else, dominated his White House agenda. In pursuing this crucial, and treacherous, quest, Nixon was about as successful as conditions allowed, Coppolani argues, thus challenging the claim that Nixon unnecessarily extended the war for an inadequate settlement that might have been reached at the start rather than the end of his first term in office.

More profoundly, the failures of American intervention in Vietnam raised questions about the nature of the nation’s Cold War mission and about how to seek its achievement. Coppolani views positively Nixon’s reconsideration of US foreign policy – the opening to China, the initiation of negotiation with the Soviet Union, the pursuit of arms reduction. Détente, in short, was a strong response to the shifting imperatives of the Cold War; it was with insight and foresight that Nixon worked towards the reconceptualization of the Cold War’s terms of bipolar conflict within a multipolar context – involving China, Europe, and Japan, as well as the United States and the Soviet Union. Coppolani nevertheless shares the critique that Nixon’s Cold War focus on superpower relations led him to misunderstand, and to mishandle, various examples of regional conflict around the world. In the critical region of the Middle East, however, Nixon created the foundations for progress in peace negotiations.

If Coppolani’s Nixon is, most of all, a politician of the Cold War, this is not to underplay domestic accomplishments. Just like foreign policy, this also took place within a context of notable change: the efforts of the civil rights movement were transforming race relations; Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society had redoubled, not without problems, the commitment of American liberals to social progress; the US economy was starting to lose its post–World War II gloss and to fall victim to the 1970s malady of ‘stagflation.’

Centre ground

The GOP of the Nixon era was riven by conflict between conservative Republicans on the one hand, and moderate and even progressive Republicans on the other. Coppolani shows how political principle as well as electoral expediency pushed Nixon toward the party's centre ground, a terrain that apparently possessed not only vote-winning appeal, but also the potential for policy innovation. 'I will be known historically for two things,' Nixon told his aide Monica Crowley in 1993. 'Watergate and the opening to China' (554).

And yet historians since Hoff have often praised his administration for domestic initiatives – on the environment, on healthcare, on government reorganisation, on welfare reform – even if many of its proposals failed to secure legislative enactment. Coppolani emphasises that Nixon, the Cold Warrior, invested much more effort in foreign than domestic policy, but he nevertheless concludes that the record was a solid one. Proposals such as the Family Assistance Plan, to reform welfare, involved a thoughtful balance between a progressive impulse to help the underprivileged, and a conservative interest to avoid welfare dependency via work requirements. Not only Nixon's prioritisation of the Cold War explains the limitations of that record; throughout his time in office, he faced a hostile Congress, firmly in Democratic hands, and interested in pushing for proposals to the left of Nixon's, as well as denying the administration legislative accomplishment. Moreover, many in the Republican party lacked Nixon's enthusiasm for reform. Coppolani shows that electoral considerations helped to shape Nixon's domestic agenda; winning re-election was a key goal that led to the crimes of Watergate. But Nixon's approach to such areas as economic management shows that economic factors were by no means wholly determinative; reflecting a centrist philosophy that was more progressive than his party's mainstream, Nixon responded to the challenges facing his country at home as well as overseas in a manner that was insightful, creative, and pragmatic.

Among the most paradoxical and controversial aspects of Nixon's domestic record involves race. According to Coppolani, Nixon was more enigmatic in this area than any other, combining good impulses with bad. Although it was during his administration that more schools in the South achieved desegregation under the *Brown* decisions of 1954 and 1955, Nixon distanced himself from this achievement, emphasising the judiciary's rather than the executive's role. Moreover, he noisily denounced 'busing' – the use of buses to transport children between their home neighbourhood and school – as a remedy to separate schools. He did little to seek the electoral support of African Americans while reaching out to conservative white southerners. Yet his administration promoted new economic opportunities for African Americans – initiating affirmative action via the 'Philadelphia Plan' in the construction sector, as well as offering support for new minority-owned businesses.

Which legacy?

Bob Dole spent part of the 'age of Nixon' serving the president as chair of the Republican National Committee (between 1971 and 1973). This was a challenging assignment, because Nixon centralised political operations in the White House and he side-lined the party, part of a plan to mobilise a 'new majority' in support of his own re-election, but also, paradoxically, to revitalise GOP fortunes. While Nixon achieved a landslide in 1972 against his liberal

Democratic challenger, George McGovern, he failed to transform his party, which instead continued to move away from his centrism.

The Watergate scandal ended Nixon's career; Coppolani writes of its long-term impact not so much in challenging what Arthur Schlesinger called the 'imperial presidency,' but rather in undercutting the development of Nixon's positive initiatives. His brand of centrism went into decline, with the rise first of Reagan conservatism and later of Republican neoconservatism – both mobilized against the foreign-policy emphasis of détente that Nixon so much prized. Regretting the path taken by today's GOP, Bob Dole recently commented that the party's climate would now be hostile to many leading Republicans of the previous generation. 'Certainly, Nixon couldn't have made it because he had ideas,' Dole said in May 2013. Coppolani's biography demonstrates the richness of those ideas, as well as outlining some reasons why, despite their promise, they failed to achieve much permanence.

Others have placed more emphasis on Nixon's thirst for division, confrontation, and even demonization of his enemies in search of political success. Rick Perlstein, for example, writes that 'Nixonland' is an enduring legacy of Nixon – a political culture of bitter contestation, partisan polarisation, and hostility to compromise. Coppolani writes compellingly of Nixon as a person as well as a politician, and of how the two interrelate. He writes, for example, of Nixon's populist distrust for the 'establishment,' and his inclination to be a loner in a way that inescapably complicated a life lived so publicly. The pugnacious approach that Nixon took to politics surrounded him with controversy, although, as Coppolani perceptively observes, he united Americans (by securing electoral support among them across many decades) even while being a polarising and divisive figure.

Coppolani's exploration of Nixon extends to his eccentricities. For example, historians have praised his administration's innovations in environmental policy, but Nixon had an environmentally unsound fondness for an open fire at home even at the height of the Washington summer (thanks to air-conditioning) and for an open-air swimming pool even in the depths of the Camp David winter. Yet Nixon's personal idiosyncrasies are not so significant in informing Coppolani's exploration of his career; this Nixon is one whose policy heft outweighs his personal failings, and his political vision transcends his appetite for political confrontation.

Antoine Coppolani reminds us of the complexities involved in seeking to understand the career of Richard Nixon, the heights of his accomplishments and the depths of his disgrace. Not Norman Rockwell, not Andy Warhol, who both painted famous portraits of Nixon, could fully capture that paradoxical personality, he concludes. Maybe Caravaggio, and the technique of chiaroscuro, could. It is Coppolani's achievement that, in taking on the contradictions surrounding this most controversial of American politics, his biography offers such a compelling and sophisticated account of Nixon and his times.

Further reading

Antoine Coppolani, « Décrypter le « cas Nixon » », *La Vie des idées*, 1st February 2010. <http://www.laviedesidees.fr/Decrypter-le-cas-Nixon.html>

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