

Interview of Richard Nixon

INTERACTION INTERVIEWS RICHARD NIXON
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The American press has been reporting that former President Richard Nixon is now one of the most sought after Republican speakers and is drawing huge responsive audiences. No one believes he is on the come-back trail and will be shooting for elective office again. (Recently after one of Nixon's speeches, Zsa Zsa Gabor demanded he run again. He replied, "Run for what? ") However, he remains an extraordinary figure in American political life, having several times achieved the spotlight and then slipped back into the wings only to re-emerge.

Despite the spate of books about him -- by political analysts, journalists, even psychiatrists -- it is still too soon to predict the ultimate judgment of history. What is certain, however, is that his own evaluation of himself and the world leaders he has dealt with has much to teach the executive who is thoughtful about his own methods of meeting crisis.

In addition to the views in Mr. Nixon's newly issued book entitled Leaders, the publisher of INTERACTION, Dr. Mortimer R. Feinberg, had the opportunity to interview the former President. The following summary, though not verbatim, is reconstructed from notes taken at the time:

Q. How did you succeed in surviving the terrible traumas, living through the enormous tragedies as well as the great triumphs?

A. Don't look back. I have never believed any failure is final unless you make it so. Obviously, this requires self-discipline, but I have tried never to look back on my defeats. If you do, like Lot's wife in the Bible, you turn to salt. Swimming up stream, if you keep swimming, makes you stronger.

Q. In your view, what are the most significant characteristics of world leaders you have known?

A. Reagan: His instincts are all fine. He is not an intellectual, but then again, very few presidents have been readers: Woodrow Wilson was the exception. Reagan does not like to see conflict. He sometimes even ignores it when it exists, rather than mediating it promptly. In this respect, I think I was different; I deliberately brought in people who disagreed, like Bill Safire and Daniel Moynihan.

Eisenhower: Eisenhower liked smiling faces around him. Gloomy people irritated him. However, he was like baked Alaska -- soft on the outside but hard as a rock inside. Except when it came to firing people. For example, when he had to confront General Patton, he used General Bedell Smith. In that unfortunate incident of Sherman Adams and the vicuna coat, he had somebody else take care of the problem. (Mr. Nixon added sardonically that Adams never should have gotten involved with Goldfine in the first place, and anyway it was a cheap vicuna coat.)

Henry Kissinger: A genius. Unfortunately, like most geniuses, they have strong minds but they always want to reexamine decisions after they were made. He kept reviewing past decisions to the point of exhaustion. I guess some intellectuals don't match their intellect with an equally strong backbone.

The Kennedys: As Alice Roosevelt Longworth said, Jack was the best of the litter -- charismatic and bright; Bobby, a Jesuit priest; Ted, a playboy who is also a good Irish politician. Lyndon Johnson: Probably the most effective politician I have ever met. I probably could have worked best with Johnson as a colleague,

He most admired Roosevelt but thought FDR should not have run for the fourth term.

Andropov and the Russians: Andropov is much brighter than Brezhnev. The Russians want a deal now because their society is falling apart. But I have always believed in the policy of link age, which I articulated

with Kissinger -- that is, you don't give the Russians anything without tying it to something they must give you. Realistically, you have to do unto others as they will do to you, not^as you would have them do to you. Kissinger would always say, "Then add ten percent!"

Q. What about women who have held power?

A. I admired Golda Meir much more than Madame Gandhi. Madame Gandhi acted like a man and became very sensitive when she was criticized, and then wanted to be treated like a woman.

Golda acted like a man and wanted to be treated like a man. Once she came to the White House and asked for planes for Israel. I said No. Instead of retreating, she blew smoke in my face and said: "We are going to get them, Mr. President, one way or the other." I liked this much better than having her retreat behind the sensitivities of a woman.

Q. What is your view of the power centers in the country, like the private sector, government, the clergy? What problems do they present to a President?

A. If you leave businessmen alone, they obviously become greedy; that's what they're paid to do. But government bureaucrats can be just as greedy for power over the private sector. The clergy see themselves as being impartial, but they do take positions. A President must therefore be able to balance off the pressures from these different forces.

Q. Is it true, Mr. President, as has been said, that from an economic point of view you are the person who traveled the furthest -- from a very poor boy to the highest office in the United States? I understand that the most money you ever saw together was the money you earned while playing poker on shipboard?

A. That's probably true, but Reagan was no boy with a silver spoon either. However, I never gambled on shipboard. I made it on land.

DIRECTIONS FOR THE FUTURE. . . Mr. Nixon, of course, has remained close to the issues that are shaping the future. Here in brief are his anticipations:

On the Middle East: He believes the U.S. should lean on the Saudis so that they will lean on King Hussein of Jordan to get some deal on the West Bank. But he is not optimistic about the prospects for success so long as Begin is in power in Israel. Nevertheless, the U.S. will ultimately prove to be the key to the Middle East problem. No other country will be trusted by both sides.

On Central America: He strongly supports President Reagan's program of aid to the moderate forces; otherwise there will be a Communist takeover of the whole area. This would then result in the possibilities of a world confrontation.

On the economic outlook: The recovery is under way. The President should reappoint Volcker. As for the long-range future, the new technology -- for example computers -- is being over played. It is reminiscent of the extravagant predictions made by the technocrats in the 1930s. Machines will never be a substitute for human intelligence.

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