

Is President Trump Walking Down a Nixonian Path?

There are many talking points in the 24-hour news cycle. Among the most shopworn are the endless comparisons of every presidential scandal to Watergate and every president involved in scandal to Richard Nixon.

In the decades since Watergate and the disgraced president, the two have been invoked so often that most people don't even bristle at the mention. The real tragedy of this, beyond what it says about our media culture, is that when events do truly turn "Nixonian," the word loses all meaning.

While many of today's allegations against Donald Trump are concerning, none, as they stand today, merit the term "Watergate"—not yet anyway. Nevertheless, Trump is very much walking a Nixonian path.

Even before the scandals that marred Nixon's presidency, his policies, unlike Ronald Reagan's, were at odds with conservative principles. While Reagan spoke of these principles loudly and often, Nixon employed a different approach.

As much as some who support Donald Trump try to draw comparisons between him and our nation's 40th president, there is arguably only one similarity between Trump and Reagan. Both campaigned and came into Washington despised by the establishment.

Then again, Jimmy Carter also came to the White House as an anti-establishment candidate, but he quickly made peace with the commentariat. Andrew Jackson, Abraham Lincoln, Teddy Roosevelt and FDR also ran against the establishment. Even Bill Clinton, a so-called government champion, ran campaigns that advocated reforming and rescuing D.C. from the ever-

growing corruption which has devoured it whole.

After all, Trump's "draining the swamp" and Clinton's "change" may differ in articulation, but not the diagnosis. They all saw the influence of the elitist culture and special interests as an illness plaguing the country. Trump and Reagan would agree on this, but it isn't exactly a Reagan-only—or even a conservative-only—platform.

Trump and Gerald Ford? That's actually closer. Ford's conservative streak was questionable, especially when challenged by an actual conservative like Reagan in 1976.

But Trump's true historical doppelganger is none other than Nixon. Nixon employed wage and price controls. Trump has threatened to employ trade barriers. Nixon waged war against the "effete snobs" of the establishment. Trump is waging war against the Washington "swamp." Nixon eschewed Washington society like the Correspondents' Dinner. So has Trump. Both Nixon and Trump liked to leave D.C. for Florida. Nixon preferred to deal with paper instead of people. Trump seems to prefer cable TV to people.

The 37th president's attorney general, John Mitchell, said in 1969, "Watch what we do, not what we say." Nothing spoke to this more than Nixon's appointment Henry Kissinger as secretary of state. Kissinger was a big proponent and supporter of *realpolitik* (a pragmatic approach to foreign policy that favored necessity over philosophy), which allowed the Nixon administration to ease tensions with both Communist China and the Soviet Union.

However disjointed, the most consistent theme throughout Trump's foreign policy is one that eschews any observance to policies, treaties, and alliances past and instead embraces a hardline "America-First" approach. These actions make Nixon and Trump outliers to almost every other president of their respective ages.

And while similarities in being outliers does not create similarity in belief, the two presidencies are becoming more and more alike. Trump's turnabout on DACA is very Nixonian, such as Nixon spending a lifetime bashing the "Cowardly College of Communist Containment" and then landing in Beijing, to the astonishment of the world.

For decades before, previous presidents like Truman, Eisenhower and Kennedy all saw communism as a real threat to the United States and the Free World. China was not recognized as a sovereign nation until Nixon. Détente with the ever-militarized Soviet Union was begun under Nixon.

While successive presidents may not have liked it and did find themselves making deals with less than morally upstanding figures, they never embraced it in the way Nixon and Trump did. It was Reagan who reversed Nixon's approach, arguing that American individuality and principles were incompatible with communism. That's hardly the "Trump" model. Further, Trump's Russian strategy isn't exactly what any historian would call "Gipper approved."

Russia may not be the Soviet Union anymore, but the lies, corruption and hegemonic state remain the same. Nixon was unconcerned with the Soviets record on human rights and, while Trump has ordered some trade halted, his relations with Putin are more akin to Nixon and Brezhnev than Reagan and Brezhnev at a similar time.

Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev? They became friends but only on Reagan's terms ... which happened to be the destruction of the Soviet Union. At the end, even Gorbachev admitted the future pointed to freedom not collectivism. He was agreeing with Reagan, which Reagan applauded. Being magnanimous in victory is far different than being chummy while in economic and political combat.

Then there's economic policies of Nixon: In August 1971, Nixon

issued Executive Order 11615, which put a 90-day freeze on all wages and prices. "No person shall charge, assess, or receive, directly or indirectly in any transaction prices or rents in any form higher than those permitted hereunder," it read," and no person shall, directly or indirectly, pay or agree to pay in any transaction wages or salaries in any form, or to use any means to obtain payment of wages and salaries in any form, higher than those permitted hereunder, whether by retroactive increase or otherwise."

Such a move would've had given free-market conservatives aneurysms. Not only did the government step into the market and the economy, it had ordered no price increase for any items or wage. Trump may not have reached this level yet but his recent comments on "talking guns ... then due process," are not philosophically far off. Meanwhile, either action would leave the Gipper speechless. While all these echoes are valid, there is one more real and troubling than any other.

In 1971, Senators Walter Mondale and Ted Kennedy proposed large personal tax cuts to stimulate the economy. Nixon said, no, that would be irresponsible and proposed instead massive federal spending to prime the pump, just as Trump has proposed massive federal spending on infrastructure, rather than letting the states enact their own rebuilding projects.

Reagan was a free trader, believing it built countries so as to allow people to stay in their own countries while creating a stronger bulwark against Soviet hegemony. Trump is taking the GOP back to the days of Smoot Hawley.

Trump believes the only support he needs is from himself, his family, his advisors and his supporters, not the American people at large, nor the free world. He has made it resoundingly clear that he is ready, willing, and able to alienate allies and permanently create chasms between himself and even those voters who might otherwise be inclined to vote for him.

His recent gun proposals would, in a different time, encourage progressive moderates to his side. Meanwhile his overall approach to government is one of a businessman: he believes, as an irrefutable fact, that the role of his cabinet, advisors and the government, as a whole, is one of complete obedience and loyalty to even his most ... questionable proposals. This is quintessential Nixon.

Reagan always recruited people to the conservative movement, as he did in his 1976 challenge to Ford and again in 1980 in Detroit, when he called on "Democrats and independents to join a ... community of shared values." Trump has been less nimble, content to appeal only to his base.

Nixon demanded personal loyalty, above all and fired those who did not meet expectations. Those who would not toe the line were enemies and the more his poll numbers sank the more enemies he saw.

Nixon would bray and moan about the elites in their "ivory towers and the evil press who he both despised for opposing him and resented for not embracing him. Many a sociologist theorize that Nixon quietly yearned for affirmation and affection, and he seethed at those who denied it to him. His behavior became almost like a man who only stops condemning the media to celebrate them when he is named "Man of the Year." He would loudly scream and curse the pundits, journalists, and anchors from the comfort of the Executive Residence. One doesn't need to wonder what his Twitter account would have looked like; we have a living example. Twitter is more public, much to the chagrin of the American people.

With how low his approval rating is, Trump's continuing alienation is not a smart move. President Nixon's lowest approval was in July and August 1974 at 24 percent. His Silent Majority had melted away.

Trump, in comparison, is sitting at roughly 35 percent.

Nixon's low came after a full term and a half; Trump is slightly more than a year in. His supporters do give him a 93 percent rating, but 93 percent from your fan club is not the mark of a good presidency. Political strength comes from many, not few.

In Nixon's last days, he could be found wandering alone through the White House, muttering to portraits of presidents past. Trump isn't there yet. But with the loss of Hope Hicks, the exile of Jared Kushner, the potential loss of Gen. H. R. McMaster and the attacks on Chief of Staff General John Kelly, he is walling himself off, just as Nixon did.

The hallways Donald Trump walks are certainly getting lonelier and lonelier, and though he isn't speaking to the presidential portraits as far as we know, the ghost of Richard Milhous Nixon is walking with him. {eo}

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