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The Trump – Nixon connection: An exercise in historical memory

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Abstract. This article explores the role of historical memory as applied to the presidential administration of Donald J. Trump. Specifically, I survey how the administration of Richard Nixon was used in media representations in order to make a linkage between these administrations. I discuss problems with the use of historical memory as a reliable tool for understanding present situations. Furthermore, I examine the manner in which the Trump-Nixon connection has been made from November 2016 when President Trump was elected to the period immediately after the publication of the Robert Mueller investigation into collusion between the Donald Trump presidential campaign and the Russian State. The other issue examined is the subject of presidential impeachment by Congress and how the impeachment threat to Nixon is instructive to the political and legal situation facing Trump. Finally, I conclude on the inherent problems that historians face in the context of situational bias when trying to use historical memory as an accurate tool to discuss current situations.

Keywords: historical memory, Trump, Nixon, impeachment, Congress, Russiagate, collusion, obstruction of justice, president

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Трамп и Никсон: опыт исследования исторической памяти

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Аннотация. В статье исследуется роль исторической памяти в период администрации президента США Дональда Дж. Трампа. В частности, рассматривается, как фигура Ричарда Никсона использовалась в средствах массовой информации для сравнения этих президентов. В своем анализе автор задействует историческую память как инструмент для понимания нынешней ситуации. Он исследует то, каким образом проводились аналогии между двумя президентами с ноября 2016 г., когда Трамп был избран президентом, до момента публикации результатов расследования Роберта Мюллера о возможности сговора между предвыборным штабом Дональда Трампа и Российской Федерацией. Кроме того, поднимается тема импичмента президенту, инициированного Конгрессом США, и того, насколько история угрозы импичмента Никсону полезна для понимания политической и правовой ситуации, в которой оказался Трамп. И наконец, делается вывод о том, что при попытке использовать историческую память в качестве научного инструмента для обсуждения современности историки неизбежно сталкиваются с проблемами контекстуального характера.

Ключевые слова: историческая память, Трамп, Никсон, импичмент, Конгресс, Рашагейт, сговор, препятствие правосудию, президент

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Historical memory and how history is recorded is not the same as the actual past. Historians interpret past events, and as such there is always some bias on how that interpretation is presented. This interpretation can and often does change over time. This fluidity is dictated by present circumstances, and as circumstances alter so does the presentation and bias. When the historical memory of lay persons is accounted for, biases appear in more dramatic form. Historical memory encompasses three main areas. These is Familial Memory, Religious Memory and National Memory. In the context of how Donald Trump's presidency should be thought about in relation to past

administrations it is the third of these areas that is most relevant to this discussion.

Immediately following his election in 2016, President Donald Trump's detractors had already begun whispering a name to attach to his, "Nixon". There was a particular thirst in the major media to promote this connection. Articles carried titles such as, "Reporting from 1974 confirms: Trump and Nixon are uncannily similar"¹. This headline did not appear in some fringe publication with dubious motives, but was an article published in *The Washington Post*.

Lee Siegel writing in the *Columbia Journalism Review*, "Remembering history won't save us from Donald Trump", alludes to the comparison while arguing that the fervor to make it has become a problem. Siegel noted, "We've seen Trump compared to fascist dictators of every stripe, from ancient Roman tyrants to European dictators of the 1920s to the Latin American *caudillos*, as well as to Joseph McCarthy and Roy Cohen; Reagan; And Nixon, Nixon, Nixon"².

Francesca Polletta and Jessica Callahan noted in their article, "Deep stories, nostalgia narratives, and fake news: storytelling in the Trump era", "The fact that people often share stories as a way of building collective identity, for its part, helps to explain why stories' plausibility may be relatively unimportant to them" [Polletta, Callahan 2017, p. 393]. Therefore the point of connecting the election of Donald Trump to the legacy of Richard Nixon was to capitalize on the negative reputation of the latter in the context of the former.

In this article I will first survey a sample of Trump-Nixon articles published early in his presidency and how this link between presidencies was presented to the public. Then I will set out to examine the actual similarities and differences between the two men personally and professionally and how these factors support or detract from the general assertion that a Trumpian presidency is an emulation of Nixon's reign. Finally, this article will set out to examine the most common connection asserted or alluded to, the impeachment of a President of the United States.

¹ Rosenberg, A. (2017), "Reporting from 1974 confirms: Nixon and Trump are uncannily similar", *The Washington Post*, May 25, [Online], available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/act-four/wp/2017/05/25/trump-in-2017-or-nixon-in-1974-from-shady-charities-to-self-sabotage-who-cantell/> (Accessed 9 May 2019).

² Siegel, L. (2017), "Remembering history won't save us from Donald Trump", *Columbia Journalism Review*, May 18, [Online], available at: <https://www.cjr.org/analysis/trump-nixon-president.php> (Accessed 12 May 2019).

1. *Trump as Nixon, media comparisons*

About halfway through Donald Trump's first year in office *Vanity Fair* magazine published a collection of essays by six presidential scholars titled "How will history judge the Trump presidency?" Historian Robert Dallek, clearly no fan of Trump, broadly compared the Robert Mueller investigation about Russian interference in the 2016 election to the same troubles that plagued Richard Nixon, not too subtly alluding to a possible impeachment. Historian Garry Wills' essay, titled "The Nixon question" was even more direct in his comparison between the two presidents, writing, "Thus the default comparison has become with Richard Nixon"³. Wills further points out, "There are some superficial resemblances between Trump and Nixon. Trump, like Nixon, has bottomless reserves of self-pity. Nixon, like Trump, was contemptuous of the press. But the dynamics in their cases are entirely different"⁴.

Historian Luke Nichter in his article, "The Nixon tapes and Donald Trump" wrote,

Since President Trump's inauguration, and even before, there have been countless comparisons between the 37th [Nixon] and 45th presidents of the United States. Some comparisons make sense, while others do not... Perhaps the most important similarity between Nixon and Trump is that each trusts no one more than he trusts himself⁵.

Nichter then goes on to analyze the events surrounding the Nixon tapes and his conjecture on the possible existence of Trump tapes, which if they exist could be his undoing.

Writing for *Slate Magazine*, former director of the Nixon Library Tim Naftali's article "How Nixonian is Donald Trump?" opens with the following, "Firing the acting attorney general, threatening widespread investigations against civil servants, characterizing unfriendly press as

³ Berg, S., Dallek R., Meacham J., Morris E., Schiff S., and Wills G. (2017), "How will history judge the Trump presidency?", *Vanity Fair*, Sept. 7, [Online], available at: <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2017/09/historians-on-trump-presidency> (Accessed 19 May 2019).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Nichter, L. (2017), "The Nixon tapes and Donald Trump", *OUPblog. Oxford University Press's Academic Insights for the Thinking World*, June 28, [Online], available at: <https://blog.oup.com/2017/06/nixon-tapes-donald-trump-history/> (Accessed 15 May 2019).

enemies of the state... is it any wonder that nearly 45 years later, we have Richard Nixon on the mind?"⁶ Naftali focused his attention of the personal characteristics of both men, particularly their penchant for pettiness and vindictiveness. Qualities that each man held and holds in impressive quantities.

Nixon biographer and author John Farrell writing for *VOX* noted some of the same similarities when writing, "We're barely into the Trump administration and we've had war on the press, electronic eavesdropping, a sacked attorney general, humungous demonstrations, fury over a Democratic National Committee break-in, Cold War-style skirmishes, and scandalous intrigues akin to Watergate. Sound familiar?"⁷ Despite this statement, he also noted that he approached such comparisons with both caution and restraint because despite some apparent similarities between the two presidents, there also exists some fundamental differences. Unlike Donald Trump who embraced white nationalist figures and groups, Nixon had been a supporter of 1960s civil rights legislation and according to Farrell, may have lost his 1962 bid for governor of California over his denunciation of the far-right John Birch Society. A group Nixon had remarked to President Eisenhower was among the "lunatic fringe"⁸.

Farrell opines that the comparison to cast Nixon and Trump in the same light was due to the almost singular position that the former holds in American historical memory. He writes, "Why is Nixon the go-to model for presidential misbehavior? For one thing, he is deeply embedded in our lives and culture"⁹. While Farrell was one of the earliest to preach caution on overly zealous associations between Nixon and Trump, there were others in the media who also questioned this comparison. Graham Vyse writing for *The New Republic*, "Is Trump a new Nixon? Historians can't agree", offered some conflicting perspectives on this use of historical memory. Farrell cited Nixonian biographer Rick Pearlstein whose opinion on the matter has been in much demand

⁶Naftali, T. (2017), "How Nixonian is Donald Trump", *Slate*, March 9, [Online], available at: <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2017/03/a-nixon-scholar-compares-the-early-days-of-trumps-presidency-with-nixons.html> (Accessed 18 May 2019).

⁷Farrell, J. (2017), "A Nixon biographer explains how Trump compares", *Vox*, May 11, [Online], available at: <https://www.vox.com/the-big-idea/2017/3/9/14860664/nixon-trump-compared-farrell-biography> (Accessed 18 May 2019).

⁸Ibid.

⁹Ibid.

following the inauguration. He noted that Pearlstein was experiencing fatigue over the comparison, "...the prevalence of the Trump-Nixon comparison is making him question all such comparisons between past and present". He goes on to quote Pearlstein as saying,

I'm seeing the whole concept of the 'historical parallel' as perverse, and bearing little resemblance to actually mature understanding of the present in light of the past. People want to grasp for the familiar in confusing times, but it's often just an evasion of the evidence in front of them. People should be looking at what is happening now¹⁰.

With Pearlstein's advice in mind, let us look at both Trump and Nixon within their respective political historical contexts and see how this comparison arose and perhaps why it is not as instructive as some hope.

2. Trump and Nixon, men and politicians from two different worlds

Why then has the Nixon and Trump comparison seen so much traction in the media? The men could not have been personally more different. Nixon was from a poor but devoutly religious family with strong Quaker values with a professional history of public service. After serving in both chambers of Congress and as Vice-President, Nixon was the consummate insider. Trump by contrast was a third generation American on his father's side and first on his mothers. His call to public service only came very late in his life. Trump played on the political mood of the time by highlighting his credentials as an established businessman and an outsider to government.

Where there were some political similarities was in their pathways to election. Both Nixon and Trump helped to realign voting constituencies in their favor. Nixon used the Southern Strategy as his pathway to office. This relied on a campaign in which appeals were made to white southern voters by turning them against the Democratic Party. The purpose was to fracture the traditional support that the Democratic Party enjoyed among conservative rural and southern whites and bring those people over to the Republican ticket with racial appeals. This is where the similarities end though.

The political landscape was quite different in 2016 for Trump. Randall Stephens discusses this in his 2018 article, "Evangelicals and

¹⁰ Vyse, G. (2017), "Is Trump a new Nixon? Historians can't agree", *The New Republic*, June 1, [Online], available at: <https://newrepublic.com/article/143014/trump-new-nixon-historians-cant-agree> (Accessed 11 May 2019).

Trump – lessons from the Nixon era”. Stephens noted this shift, how instead of turning disaffected southern Democrats away from their traditional party, the strategy undertaken by the Trump team was to capitalize on an unprecedented feeling that traditional Republican candidates were unsuitable, and to align with far-right conservative religious groups and nationalists. Two constituencies that felt particularly marginalized during the Obama years.

Historian Laura Ellyn Smith’s 2018 article, “How Donald Trump put an end to the GOPs Southern Strategy”, analyzed how the traditional Southern Strategy employed by Nixon’s team relied on dog whistles and assertions to garner the racist vote. This was replaced by Trump’s return to the pre-Civil Rights era politics with its more overt racism. It should be noted that for Nixon, the Southern Strategy was a means for gaining the presidency. As vice-president he was notably in favor of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision when President Eisenhower was not. Yet for Trump, this overt racism both on the campaign trail and during his time in office is easier to understand as a natural extension of his personal views as much as a campaign strategy. Following the murder of Heather Hayer by white nationalist James Alex Fields, Jr. in Charlottesville, Virginia in 2017, President Trump told reporters at a press conference held shortly afterwards that both sides had “very fine people”¹¹. Not only was this seen at the time as an endorsement of white nationalist terrorism, but the President has not recanted his words in the years since the incident.

If it was not the men’s backgrounds or political pasts that first called forth this almost reflexive comparison, what was it? The two presidents have something much more fundamental in common, reputations for lax political morality and general corruption. With his resignation from office in the wake of the Watergate Scandal in 1974, two things have been cemented in the minds of most American citizens. First, Richard Nixon’s presidential administration was the most corrupt in the history of the modern presidency. Second, the suffix – gate would be forever linked to all manner of official scandals and corruptions. Upon his election to the Office of the President of the United States in November 2016 Donald Trump has been beset by all manner of charges relating to his legitimacy to hold the position. From its outset the Trump admin-

¹¹ Sonmez, F. and Parker, A. (2019), “As Trump stands by Charlottesville remarks, rise of white nationalist violence becomes an issue in 2020 presidential race”, *The Washington Post*. Apr. 28, [Online], available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/national/longterm/watergate/articles/102173-2.htm> (Accessed 2 May 2019).

istration was also cast as one of deep corruption. The most significant of these charges was that Donald Trump stole the election from Hillary Clinton with the help of the Russian government. This scandal has been routinely labeled as ‘Russiagate’. Historians, journalists, political scientists, politicians and those among the public have been at great pains to draw similarities between the Trump presidency in 2016 and that of Richard Nixon in 1973.

In the last portion of this article I will discuss the general topic of history in memory and the Nixon – Trump comparison. Specifically, I will focus on their relationship to impeachment and how this threat to a presidency was and is faced by both administrations.

3. The Nixon-Trump connection: The specter of impeachment

While one may expect that the link between Trump and Nixon in the context of historical memory would have eroded or mutated over the course of the former’s time in office, as of the middle of 2019, this assertion is still being made. In fact, arguably the narrative has only found renewed life following the 2019 publication of the Robert Mueller investigation into the President’s possible collusion with the Russian State.

In his work “The case for impeachment”, Allan Lichtman recalled how he had first predicted the electoral success of Trump. Since the election Lichtman had been predicting that Donald J. Trump would face impeachment. He based his opinion on Trump’s “past and proven behavior” [Lichtman 2018, p. 5] stating, “History is not geometry and historical parallels are never exact, yet a president who seems to have learned nothing from history is abusing and violating the public trust and setting the stage for a myriad of impeachable offenses that could get him removed from office” [Lichtman 2018, p. 5].

3a. The Richard Nixon case. Despite how some remember Nixon, specifically regarding his departure from the presidency, he was never in fact impeached. After losing too much support in Congress and when the possibility of both impeachment and conviction seemed assured, Nixon resigned from office on 9 August 1974. What led to that day in August 1974? It is widely regarded that it was Nixon’s connection to the break-in of the Democratic Party Headquarters located in the Watergate Hotel in Washington, D.C. that served as the catalyst for his resignation.

In his work, “Impeachment: An American history”, Naftali suggested that it was not the Watergate break-in that did in the President. Instead it was how he managed the investigation and attempted to cover it up. Naftali noted, “Law enforcement and the judiciary had evidence of Nixon’s criminal behavior eight months before he left office, and yet there was no predictable way to ensure his removal” [Engel, Meacham, Naftali, and Baker 2018, loc. 2396]. Naftali cited the Saturday Night Massacre as the tipping point leading to the end of the president’s hopes of remaining in office.

The so-called Saturday Night Massacre took place on 20 October 1973 after Special Prosecutor investigating the Watergate break-ins, Archibald Cox, had subpoenaed the secret Oval Office tapes that Nixon made of his conversations with visitors. Cox demanded that Nixon turn over these tapes. Instead, Nixon ordered the prosecutor to be fired. As a result, first Nixon’s Attorney General Elliot Richardson resigned, then the Assistant Attorney General William French Smith resigned after him. Only after ordering the third person in charge of the Justice Department, Robert F. Bork, was Cox terminated. It became an untenable political embarrassment for Nixon. This very public mutiny along with the firing of Cox had cemented a downward negative opinion of Nixon in the minds of the general public.

When the end came for Nixon’s presidency he was already into his second term of office. Ironically, the Watergate caper was not even necessary for the President, Nixon had won his 1972 reelection campaign by a landslide...

3b. Russiagate and the Trump presidency. Donald Trump was elected in 2016 to his first and very contested term in office by nothing at all resembling a ‘landslide’. In fact, from the very first day following the election, rumors began to fly around the media and public that Trump had stolen the election, and it was the Russians who helped him do it. As with Nixon before him, it appears that it may be obstruction of justice that brings trouble to Trump and not the actual activity being obstructed.

Russiagate has found considerable traction in the halls of government. Special Prosecutor Robert Mueller recently concluded his investigation and his report was only released to the public a few weeks ago. It is far too soon to understand what the implications of that report are for the President, but there is already some question if Trump had engaged in obstruction and a coverup regarding his own investigation. Much like with Nixon before him, it may not be the event but the possible coverup of the investigation that does in Trump.

And like with Nixon's Saturday Night Massacre, Trump had his own embarrassing firing at the Justice Department. This was the termination of FBI Director James Comey as reported on 9 May 2017 in *The New York Times*¹². In some people's opinion Comey played a key role in the election of Trump by giving testimony to Congress regarding Hillary Clinton's email investigation just days before the 2016 election. John Cassidy writing for *The New Yorker* called the incident, "James Comey's October surprise", a remark which touched upon the event that historians cite as the leading reason incumbent President Jimmy Carter lost to Ronald Reagan in 1980¹³. If this did not prove his preference for Trump, it certainly was proof that Comey was not prejudiced against him.

However, it was due to Trump's displeasure with Comey and his handling of the FBI's Russiagate investigation that he was finally terminated by the President on 9 May 2017. According to Comey himself in later interviews, he was pressured by Trump to let go of some aspects of the investigation into the affairs of Trump's National Security Advisor Michael Flynn. As reported in *The New York Times*, Comey was able to back this version of events up by producing a memo he had authored at the time of the events¹⁴. In later interviews Comey went so far as to comment that Trump's actions could constitute the type of obstruction of justice charges that had threatened a successful impeachment and conviction of Nixon several decades before¹⁵. He went on to add that if Trump were not a sitting President, he would likely have been charged already.

¹²Shear M., and Apuzzo, M. (2017), "F.B.I. Director James Comey is fired by Trump", *The New York Times*, May 9, [Online], available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/09/us/politics/james-comey-fired-fbi.html> (Accessed 9 May 2019).

¹³Cassidy, J. (2017), "James Comey's October surprise", *The New Yorker*. June 19, [Online], available at: <https://www.newyorker.com/news/john-cassidy/james-comeys-october-surprise> (Accessed 21 May 2019).

¹⁴Schmidt, M. (2017), "Comey Memo says Trump asked him to end Flynn investigation", *The New York Times*, May 16, [Online], available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/16/us/politics/james-comey-trump-flynn-russia-investigation.html> (Accessed 11 May 2019).

¹⁵Daniels, J. (2019), "James Comey says Trump firing him was 'potentially obstruction of justice' ", *CNBC*, March 27, [Online], available at: <https://www.cbc.com/2019/03/27/james-comey-views-his-firing-as-potentially-obstruction-of-justice.html> (Accessed 13 May 2019).

John Farrell, Darren Samuelsohn, Stephen Kinzer, and Cynthia Barnett writing recently for *Politico*, “Nixon almost survived Watergate. Does Mueller have a smoking gun on Trump?”, listed the many reasons why Donald Trump should not be in office. However, the authors also noted that none of that matters, adding, “...unless the Mueller report contains a smoking gun – and we already know it does not recommend any further indictments – one can see why House Speaker Nancy Pelosi recently labeled calls for impeachment a distraction”¹⁶.

Conclusion

When people are tempted to draw comparisons between Donald J. Trump and Richard Nixon, it is almost without exception a comparison that involves the question of impeachment. Such comparisons look less closely at facts such as Nixon’s escape from impeachment, and more to the fact that his impeachment was all but assured had he decided to be forced from office. Therefore, while not in fact, Nixon was *defacto* impeached, at least for the purposes of this historical memory narrative. Moreover, this comparison carries the strong implication that Trump will face a similar fate as his predecessor. Much of this is due to the public perception that Nixon was the most corrupt president of the 20th century, as much as in the minds of his critics at least Trump is shaping up to take that title in the 21st century.

As evidence of the flexible quality of historical memory exercises people are already looking to new comparisons for conceptualizing Donald Trump following the publication of the Mueller Report. Historian Jasmin Bath’s article for *The Washington Post* titled, “How the Mueller Report could end the Trump presidency without impeachment”, discusses Donald Trump’s political problems in the context of those of James Buchanan in 1860... We can examine that theory another time.

¹⁶ Farrell, J., Samuelsohn, D., Kinzer, S., and Barnett, C. (2019), “Nixon almost survived Watergate. Does Mueller have a smoking gun on Trump?”, *POLITICO Magazine*, March 24, [Online], available at: <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2019/03/24/nixon-watergate-mueller-trump-226109> (Accessed 10 May 2019).

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