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Nixon Volume #2: The Triumph of a Politician 1962-1972

Stephen E. Ambrose

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This book is about one of the most complex and puzzling of our chief executives at the apogee of his career--rebounding from defeat to an innovative, high-risk presidency, already sowing the seeds of his ruin.
Illustrated.

Nixon Volume #2: The Triumph of a Politician 1962-1972 Details

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From Reader Review Nixon Volume #2: The Triumph of a Politician 1962-1972 for online ebook

Aaron Million says

Volume II of Stephen Ambrose's series on Richard Nixon begins with the aftermath of Nixon's disastrous run for Governor of California in 1962, and his "last press conference." This volume chronicles Nixon's slow, gradual political reemergence throughout the mid-60s, his campaign and subsequent election to President in 1968, and through his first term, following the foreign policy successes of the trips to Peking and Moscow and his landslide victory over Senator George McGovern in 1972. It ends with Watergate beginning to fill Nixon's life, like a dark cloud moving in from the horizon and gaining in size as it moves.

For the most part, Ambrose keeps the narrative moving swiftly, providing a good balance of facts and analysis. Nixon's views and actions are reviewed with a critical but contextual eye – Ambrose attempts to explain the context of the times that Nixon was operating in, and the disparate and often highly egotistical personalities that he had to deal with. Much of the parts concerning the presidency obviously focuses on Nixon's efforts to find a way out of Vietnam. Ambrose scores Nixon on being unhelpful at the best, and possibly intentionally interfering at the worst, with Lyndon Johnson's attempts at a settlement in 1968. I say "possibly" only because recently has it been proven by John Farrell in his new Nixon biography that Nixon did indeed obstruct the peace process that year.

Occasionally, Ambrose wanders a bit too far afield. He spends an entire page writing about the wedding of Julie Nixon and David Eisenhower, all the way down to the wedding gown styles worn (p. 240). This kind of detail could be spared from the book without anyone being the worse for it.

Ambrose is by no means a Nixon apologist; nor is he necessarily a Nixon hater. Overall, he strives to be as impartial as possible, but Nixon is one of those people who it is almost (and maybe is) impossible to be impartial about. Nixon, like all of us, had his flaws. Yet, so many of those seemed so petty, and they ended up affecting so many people, that rightly or wrongly the flaws take on added importance. While Ambrose strives to be fair, and does not maliciously go after Nixon when many others would, this volume would by no means be considered Nixon-friendly.

The paranoia, distrust, suspicion and anger seeped through in almost everything that Nixon did. Ambrose makes good use of Nixon's comments on his daily News Summaries – detailed media capsules prepared by Mort Allin and Pat Buchanan highlighting the news media's coverage of the Nixon Administration. The authors of the summaries were hard-corer right-wingers, and their bias was reflected in the information they provided to Nixon, who in turn ate it up, believed all of it, and would scribble notes in the margins – marching orders to his subordinates. A brief example from page 617: "When he read that Senator Charles Percy had expressed his dismay over Nixon's refusal to support a consumer bill, Nixon noted that Illinois looked safe in the presidential race, then ordered 'H – Hack him [Percy] up a bit.' The "H" stood for Bob Haldeman, Nixon's domineering Chief of Staff.

While this biography is now somewhat dated, and Ambrose was hampered to an extent by the relative small number of tapes that had been made available when he wrote this book, he makes up for it in his trenchant analysis of Nixon both as a person and as a politician. Unfortunately, as is typically the case with Ambrose, the notes section is bare-bones and shows that he did not have the breadth of sources that one would ideally like to have in crafting an accurate portrayal of a famous person. Nonetheless, this is a highly readable and entertaining book, and anyone interested in Nixon or his presidency will find it worthwhile to read.

Grade: B+

Amy says

This volume follows the first in good pacing, a nice amount of detail, and enough asides and analyses to make it fun and interesting. (Subject is pretty interesting, anyway!)

Marc says

"Richard Helms, head of the CIA, opened the meeting by listing the countries that had recognized Biafra. Nixon stopped him and said "Look Dick, you've left a couple of countries - Zambia and the Ivory Coast." Helms, somewhat shaken, got going again, this time about tribal rivalries being part of the problem. Nixon stopped him again. "Yes. And this is a problem which really goes back to the history of that country. The British colonial policy favored the Moslem Hausas in the north and that aggravated the tensions and there's cultural as well as economical and political factors here. It's a very, very tragic problem." One foreign Service officer was absolutely astonished at the level of knowledge of Nixon".

Volume 2 of Ambrose's Nixon's biography is filled with lots of interesting insights about the man, the lawyer, the politician, the commander in chief that was the 37th president. the book covers his life from his exile of active politics in 1962 to his triumphal reelection in 1972. It is a tale of an astute politician who waits quietly, tours the world's capitals, builds his network and wins the big price (twice).

I was really interested in learning details about RN's life when he was no longer under the limelight. His comeback in 68' was everything but meticulously planned since his "retirement" in 62'. Nixon tried to be the poster boy of the opposition to LBJ's Great Society and involvement in Vietnam and was very successful at getting attention from the press.

His first mandate covers most of the book. Ambrose spends a great deal of time elaborating on the White House policies and the battles between RN, a democratic controlled congress and a liberal leaning Supreme Court. But, as the author points out often, Nixon had little interest in domestic policies. Focusing much of his energy on the Cold War and his obsession with the press and leaks from his staff.

Vietnam is, of course, covered at length. Here, Ambrose doesn't go soft on his deception about Nixon's false campaign pledge to end the war in his first term. He also discusses the 1968 cease fire and LBJ's attempt to negotiate peace before the election saying that we can't be sure if Nixon sabotaged the negotiation. However, thanks to Farrel's biography of Nixon published in 2017, we now have documents proving he actually had had a back channel to South Vietnam through a political operative and tried to convinced Saigon and Hanoi not to play ball with the democrats. Johnson knew it but decided not to expose Nixon's trick because it would have shown that the White House was spying on the republican candidate (LBJ spied on Humphrey as well).

The slowly unfolding Watergate Scandal gets a great deal of writing too. The authors makes a point of analyzing it through the sole perspective of Nixon's actions. He also does a good job at showing the essential with a talent for great narrative:

"Nixon had actively attempted to obstruct justice by ordering the CIA to lie to the FBI and by buying the

silence of the guilty through offers of clemency and financial support. In his public statements - that he ordered a vigorous FBI investigation and that he had ordered an internal White House investigation that proved no one on his staff was involved - he had lied. He had also lied in private to Halderman, Ehrlichman, and Colson. Eisenhower had once told Nixon that he had learned a long time ago that when you got caught, "don't try to be cute or cover up. If you do, you will get so entangled you won't know what you're doing" "

Great read, valuable book.

Moryma says

Dense, entertaining, engrossing. A long read but worth the time.

Brent says

I wish Ambrose had taken a bit more of an unbiased look at Nixon in this book. He did a better job of hiding his hatred of the man in Volume 1. Nixon had enough faults and problems without having to ramp up any negatives.

I've really liked Ambrose's other works and was just disappointed to see him let his bias show so much.

Chris Schaffer says

Excellent chronicle of Nixon post disastrous gubernatorial race through his first term and reelection. Does a great job describing Nixon prior to becoming a candidate in '68 and then covering that monumental election. Author makes assessments through.

Ron says

Part 2 of Ambrose's Nixon series is a balanced look at his return from the political wilderness, eventually to reach the Oval Office. Such a biography of Nixon seems unlikely today, which is unfortunate. Well done, sadly very few reviews here.

Rory says

Stephen E. Ambrose was Richard Nixon's best biographer, basing his insights into Nixon's life and presidency on the facts (Facts! I remember those!) and never being swayed by any particular political persuasion. Ambrose calls Nixon out on actions when he deems them patently foolish, and praises him for actions that appear to have worked, to have been effective, particularly in foreign policy, as there was little to speak of in domestic policy in Nixon's first term.

If you're looking for the truth of Nixon, as best as can be ascertained, Ambrose is the finest guide.

Clem says

Richard Nixon: The Triumph of a Politician 1962-1972 by Stephen Ambrose

“I’m not going to be the first President of the United States to lose a war.” – Richard Nixon
“Meet the new boss, same as the old boss...” – The Who

After reading the highly enjoyable first of three books of the life of Richard Nixon by Stephen Ambrose, I was delighted to pick up the second volume, and I immensely enjoyed this work with the same fervor as the first. This one immediately picks up where the first volume ended, Nixon’s failed run for Governor of California in 1962, which in a sense, was a bigger defeat than his first run for President two years earlier in 1960.

At the infamous press conference after he lost the governor’s race, he informed the press that it would be his “last” press conference, and that he was, so to speak, retiring. Those close to the man knew better. Although he does go into a successful practice as a lawyer in New York City after his defeat, it’s very clear to everyone close to him that the man is nowhere near finished with his political career. Being the smart politician he was, he knew just what to do to keep his name “alive”. Realizing (correctly) that he has no shot at the 1964 nomination, he spends the years preparing for 1968.

Well, anyone who knows anything about history in the 1960s knows that this was the decade of Vietnam. Before Nixon becomes president, Vietnam is already a tangled mess of a nightmare, and the counter culture of American youth has never been so exasperated. Nixon realizes that he’s to win the election, he needs to speak about all of the wrongs of the current administration’s handling of the war, and what needs to happen differently. Without knowing it, this begins his downfall. Simply put, he never really knew what he wanted to do differently in Vietnam. Yes, he wanted to end it, but so did the Lyndon Johnson administration. So his plan was shaky at best, but being the politician he was, he made a lot of lofty promises that sounded awfully good. He’s elected over Hubert Humphrey (Johnson’s VP) by a slim margin, and the long awaited presidency begins.

And sadly, this where the Nixon story sadly deteriorates. First, as I mentioned in my review of the first Ambrose biography, there were many that hated this man because of his ruthlessness. The fact that he was never a warm, fuzzy kinda guy, meant that his mudslinging and name calling seemed much worse than it actually was. It didn’t help when the youth of the day distrusted him from day one, and had their feelings justified shortly after Nixon took office. Ending a jungle war in Vietnam “with honor” was not as easy as it sounded. In many instances, you could forget that this book was about Nixon and, instead, about the war itself. There are many immaculate details of all of the plans, talks, strategies and ideas to bring the war to a conclusion throughout these pages, that one can easily get a bit lost. It seems as though nothing can go Nixon’s way.

What makes things worse is that Nixon takes all of the criticism that is heaped upon him incredibly personal. So much that he directs his “inner circle” of advisors to sabotage those in the press and the left-wing that are out to get him. Each day, Nixon reads a briefing of what is being said about him and his administration, and simply makes notes to have those that are “harming him” to be discredited. It’s amazing the length and frequency of what President Nixon will do. So much so, that when there’s an order to bug the DNC chairman, Larry O’Brian’s, telephone at the Watergate hotel, it really isn’t a surprise when Nixon later stated that he “couldn’t recall” giving such an order.

Watergate is only briefly touched here, and the scandal doesn’t unfold until after Nixon wins re-election.

With all the turmoil, it's almost hard to imagine how Nixon could win a re-election. He manages quite well, however. As the 1972 election draws closer, he manages to reduce the fighting in Vietnam significantly as well as open up relations with Communist Russia and Communist China. It didn't hurt that the Democratic Party was in a bit of a mess themselves and were deeply divided. Their nominee ends up being South Dakota Senator George McGovern who manages to actually swallow his feet several times during his own presidential campaign.

So Nixon is back for, what appears to be, four more years. The press are starting to talk more and more about Watergate, but Nixon and his crew aren't the slightest bit worried. These things, after all, happen all the time in politics. So the second volume concludes after Nixon's re-election.

Unlike the first volume, I actually began to immensely dislike this man. Once he became President, he was simply too paranoid, too untrusting, and never good at understanding why so many were against him. He knew how to win, but when he lost, even in public opinion, he never handled it well. So with "dirty tricks" abound, the man simply plays hardball a bit too feverishly and alienates many around him. It really is a shame that a man that was so smart in areas of foreign affairs and world government could be so helpless and baffled while trying to do something relatively simple, such as make small talk with a group of students. A tragedy indeed.

Eagerly awaiting to read the third, and final installment.

Paul Wilson says

Finished Ambrose's trilogy. At roughly 2,000 pages, the trilogy offers a fascinating portrait, from his ascent, fall, rise, and fall again. The books do nothing to dispel the notion that Nixon was a Machiavellian, disturbed man who ultimately harmed the political process, but it also shows a man gifted with several foreign policy triumphs, including triangulation with the Soviets and Chinese that did more to set the stage for the Cold War's end than probably any development, not to mention the moves towards detente and arms control.

I still think Nixon was ultimately more bad than good, but he was an exceptionally bright man whose personal foibles tragically undermined his ability to lead and inspire. Watergate of course shadows everything about Nixon, but when placed within the context of something like Iran Contra (the fact that Reagan wasn't impeached over this still makes no sense), it was not the worst crime a president ever committed (hell, it's not the worst crime Nixon ever committed). Ambrose's quote concluding his overview of Nixon's mid-term best encapsulates the man.

"It was so sad. He was a man of very great gifts, to whom much had been given, but he was incapable of enjoying life, or of seeing himself and his role realistically...Surely this author is not alone in thinking it must have been a terrible thing to be Richard Nixon.

Michael Walker says

Vol. 2 of Ambrose's biography picks up after Nixon lost his bid for California governor to Pat Brown in November 1962, thru Nixon's victory in the '68 presidential election campaign, then the presidential election night of Nov. 1972. Ambrose was a highly respected biographer, and does Nixon justice, despite his personal disclaimer in volume 1 that he never liked the man. Rather even-handed treatment of a complex political life.

Rob says

Everyone agrees that Nixon was a complex and perhaps a strange man. What strikes me about Stephen Ambrose's biography is that how similar Nixon is to other conservative leaders. I'm not sure if conservative politicians consciously followed the Nixon template or that it is the nature of right wing governments in liberal democracies that they tend to be secretive, paranoid and run by resolute cynics who tend to be driven by reacting to enemies.

A demonised man, the ultimate political cynic whose nick name, while on one level trite, was powerfully true; he was "Tricky Dicky". He played the American political system like a master musician plays his chosen instrument. He wire tapped his own cabinet. He ran vendettas against his "enemies". He could not rise above the fray, indeed he often undercut his own programs to gain political advantage. He employed people who employed all the political black arts. He played them and they played him. The paranoid, back biting secretive style permeated the whole of his administration.

Ambrose's style is to meticulously dissect Nixon's actions and political conduct. Occasionally he cannot help himself and editorialises on Nixon's personality. Mostly however he lets Nixon's actions speak for themselves. An example is an agonisingly awful episode when Nixon emotionally blackmails his family into pleading with him to run in the 1968 election even after he promised that he had enough of politics and would never run again. He knew his wife Pat particularly hated campaigning. Strangely so too did Nixon. He was the shy Quaker boy who hated falsity and fake bonhomie. What is democratic politics but fake bonhomie? Conversely what kind of prick plays politics on his own family?

Ambrose has been accused of plagiarism and I only heard of this after I was halfway through the book. I cannot say anything about this in relation to this book. I feel that he has not set out to "get" Nixon. He does try to set him in the context of his times and when he can underlines Nixon's success. Maybe Ambrose did take others stories and work and claimed them as his own but in this case I think not.

"IT IS MEALYMOUTHED, even cowardly, to end an assessment by saying that Nixon deserved to be re-elected and deserved to be repudiated. But a contradictory judgement seems inescapable with this contradictory man, the author of détente and the author of the Watergate cover-up."

Steve says

Ambrose's writing is engaging and almost conversational. He strikes an appropriate balance of maintaining objectivity and providing critical assessments of Nixon and his excesses (of which there were many). He gives credit where credit is due, but also does not hesitate to call Nixon on his lies and manipulations (of which, again, there were many). To the extent that Ambrose has been accused of plagiarism in his works, I'm not aware of any alleged instances of that in this book. All in all, the book provides an excellent narrative of Nixon's comeback from political oblivion and his first term as President. It also provides an insightful closing assessment of Nixon's first term.

Brian Schwartz says

The book closes with the election of 1972 when the Democrats imploded around the candidacy of George McGovern. Nixon should have behaved as Reagan did in 1984 and been a gentleman to the man he knew he was going to crush. Instead, his paranoia of losing and his drive to create a massive "mandate" that would empower him to completely reshape government and the federal bureaucracy to his liking, planted the seeds of his downfall.

The machinations of Watergate are covered in Ambrose's third volume. What emerges from Ambrose's text in this volume is an appreciation of Nixon's intelligence, strength in the face of adversity, and his personal conduct. What is also evident is Ambrose's frequent disgust with Nixon's ruthless and cruel conduct in both politics and government. Nixon was a study in the duality of man and Ambrose covers both sides well.

Steve says

<https://bestpresidentialbios.com/2018...>

Published in 1989, "Nixon: The Triumph of a Politician 1962-1972" is the second book in Stephen Ambrose's biographical trilogy covering the life of Richard Nixon. Ambrose was a historian and author who remains one of the best-known biographers of Dwight Eisenhower and Richard Nixon. Unfortunately, allegations of plagiarism and exaggeration have tarnished his reputation. Ambrose died in 2002 at the age of sixty-six.

This 662-page biography covers Nixon from just after his 1962 defeat in the race to become California's governor to his re-election as President of the United States ten years later. This volume exhibits many of the attributes of the inaugural book in this series: remarkable balance toward its subject, careful organization and an uncommonly unpretentious and readable style.

With its lively and comprehensible narrative this book moves faster than its length might suggest. Readers familiar with Ambrose's other biographies will recognize his careful balance of observation and analysis. And where many biographers adopt a "love him or hate him" attitude toward Nixon, Ambrose maintains a carefully balanced perspective toward his subject - praising Nixon for his best decisions and excoriating him for his worst.

The review of Nixon's years in self-imposed political exile (between 1962 and 1967) is surprisingly engaging, and his description of Nixon's campaign for the presidency in 1967 is no less compelling. President-elect Nixon's "transition" and inauguration-related activities are very well-covered and only the description of his Cabinet selection proves somewhat disappointing.

It is hardly surprising this book devotes a great deal of time to Watergate and Vietnam. Both discussions are enlightening, but the pages devoted to Watergate are a particularly commendable introduction to that topic. It is unfortunate that, while this book was being researched and written, Nixon and Kissinger were actively fighting to restrict access to their archived documents and audiotapes. Consequently, Ambrose lacked access to the full range of materials which would eventually become available.

In fact, the age of this volume and its resulting inability to draw from important sources available to the

modern biographer is one of the book's most significant shortcomings. And while Ambrose's narrative is generally engaging, it is not particularly colorful. Biographers such as McCullough, Goodwin and Millard give readers the sense of being in the moment while Ambrose recounts important events with a semi-sterile clarity...and from a distance.

As a result the reader never gets fully inside Nixon's head. Ambrose nicely describes many of his subject's strengths, flaws and contradictions...but never offers readers enough insight to really understand what makes Nixon tick. Henry Kissinger, too, plays an important role in this volume. But his portrayal here almost entirely fails to capture his enigmatic and wildly intriguing persona.

Overall, "Nixon: The Triumph of a Politician 1962-1972" provides readers a straightforward, impressively balanced and well-paced review of the ten years culminating with the pinnacle of Richard Nixon's political career. Written with the general reader in mind, this volume can be appreciated by almost anyone. And while it is not exceptional in many ways, it is solid in almost every way.

Overall rating: 4 stars
