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BOOKSHELF

Nixon's Tricks of the Trade

Obedying the courts, Nixon desegregated public schools. He got little credit for it—and didn't want any. He wanted Southerners' votes. Robert K. Landers reviews "Richard Nixon: The Life" John A. Farrell.



Presidential candidates John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon shake hands after their debate on Oct. 7, 1960. PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

By **ROBERT K. LANDERS**

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Both men were elected to Congress in 1946, one a Republican from California, the other a Democrat from Massachusetts. Both were Navy veterans. Both were interested in foreign affairs. Both were reserved in manner; neither was a backslapper. Though one freshman congressman was the striving son of a shopkeeper, and the other the self-assured son of an ambassador, Richard Nixon and John Kennedy became friends. In 1954, when Sen. Kennedy underwent a gravely risky operation on his back, Vice President Nixon, after visiting him, tearfully prayed, "Poor brave Jack is going to die. Oh God, don't let him die!"

But six years later, after their hard-fought presidential contest, Kennedy—who won the popular vote by fewer than 113,000 votes out of more than 68 million cast—was the president-elect, while Nixon was convinced that, had it not been for chicanery in Illinois and Texas, he would have been elected. He also resented the way the press had swooned over Kennedy. In short, writes John A. Farrell in "Richard Nixon," the losing candidate emerged from the contest in 1960 with "a sore mistrust of the Kennedys, a swollen sense of grievance, and a consuming resolve to never be outdone by a rival's dirty tricks again."



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Though there have been many previous books about Nixon, Mr. Farrell's comprehensive, one-volume biography is welcome. The author is an investigative reporter, experienced biographer and a prodigious researcher—there are 124 pages of meaty endnotes. In lively, vigorous prose, he takes readers through Nixon's career, offering incisive judgments and revealing details along the way.

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In his 1950 California Senate race against Helen Gahagan Douglas, who had been dubbed “the Pink Lady” by a primary rival, Nixon attacked her for having given “aid and comfort to the Communists.” Less well known is that she branded him a “demagogue” with a craving for “nice unadulterated fascism.” Also less well known: that Kennedy gave Nixon's campaign a check for \$1,000 from his father.

In his 1968 campaign, Nixon promised to “end the war and win the peace” in Vietnam. That turned out to mean letting North Vietnamese troops remain in the South while withdrawing U.S. troops and hoping the South Vietnamese government would survive long enough for its likely collapse to be perceived as its own fault. Nixon could then defend having prolonged the war for four years. “Seen in its worst light,” Mr. Farrell notes, “it was a cynical abandonment of an ally and a cause that Nixon and his predecessors, time and again, had pledged to defend.”

When the Supreme Court in 1969 ordered the “immediate” desegregation of public schools, Nixon decided to obey the courts—but, Mr. Farrell writes, “from behind a blind of rhetoric, assuring the South

that their common foes were compelling him to take action.” The rhetoric succeeded, and so did the desegregation. Nixon got little credit for it—and didn't want any. He wanted Southerners' votes.

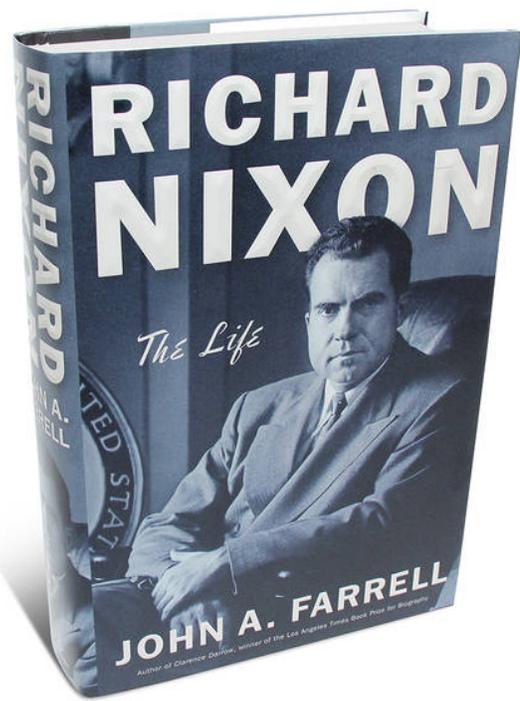


PHOTO: WSJ

By John A. Farrell

Doubleday, 737 pages, \$35

When Nixon, in exile after resigning the presidency, told interviewer David Frost that “I brought myself down. I gave them a sword,” he was engaging in “a modified limited hang-out” (in the jargon of his White House), Mr. Farrell says. It took the skills of future TV journalist Diane Sawyer, helping him with the Watergate chapters of his memoirs, “to get him to enumerate his crimes.” “RN,” says Mr. Farrell, “. . . is one of the better presidential memoirs.”

Mr. Farrell is not afraid to judge Nixon severely, but he does not neglect his accomplishments—including the opening to China, the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty with the Soviet Union and the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency. Nor does Mr. Farrell neglect the excesses of Nixon’s foes. Rep. Nixon’s leading role in exposing Alger Hiss as a Communist spy marked him as an enemy in the eyes of liberals passionately—but mistakenly—certain of Hiss’s innocence. After Nixon’s 1950 victory over Douglas, liberals turned Tricky Dick (his new nickname) into “a symbol of dirty campaigning and a threat to civil liberties” as featured relentlessly in Herblock cartoons. “Tricky Dick was becoming a caricature,” Mr. Farrell notes.

Historians have long suspected that, despite his denials, Nixon himself (and not just people working for him) had tried to sabotage President Lyndon Johnson’s 1968 initiative to end the war in Vietnam. It had been established that an intermediary from the Nixon camp urged South Vietnam President Nguyen Van Thieu to stall the peace talks and wait for a better deal from the Nixon administration. North Vietnam—suffering from a major defeat in its Tet Offensive—was under pressure from Moscow to be flexible in the talks. Johnson was furious when he learned of the contact with Thieu, and now wanted the settlement to help the Democratic nominee, Hubert Humphrey.

In his research into the papers of Nixon’s closest aide, H.R. Haldeman, Mr. Farrell found notes that confirmed Nixon’s leading role in the attempted sabotage. Haldeman’s notes indicated that in a phone call on Oct. 22, 1968, Nixon directed him to “monkey wrench” the peace initiative. “Keep Anna Chennault [the intermediary] working on SVN [South Vietnam],” Nixon ordered.

Nixon’s action appears to violate the Logan Act, which bars private citizens from communicating with foreign governments about “disputes or controversies” with the U.S. But Nixon’s action was worse than that, in Mr. Farrell’s view. Though the chances of a settlement may have been slim, Nixon acted as if his election were more important than ending the war he privately regarded as unwinnable. “Given the lives and human suffering at stake, and the internal discord that was ripping the United States apart,” Mr. Farrell writes, “it is hard not to conclude that, of all of Richard Nixon’s actions in a lifetime of politics, this was the most reprehensible.” Would Nixon have done it, one wonders, had he not been so disillusioned by his 1960 loss and so determined never to let a rival’s “dirty tricks” get the better of him again?

Mr. Landers, a writer in Baltimore, posts his reviews and essays at robertklanders.com.