Political Capital: A Historiography of President Nixon's Domestic Policy[1]

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"The 2,027 days Nixon spent in office have been remembered most for Watergate, next for foreign policy, and least for domestic reform…this order should be reversed."

—Joan Hoff[2]

In looking over Richard Nixon's domestic policy agenda, many Americans find themselves lost in a fragmented understanding of a presidency that brought about some of the most significant changes in American history. Writings about President Nixon tend to focus on the controversies revolving around Watergate (one of the most exciting and dramatic elements in modern American history), and his foreign policy relations. As time advances further away from Watergate, many scholars are restructuring their focus and developing a "beyond Watergate" approach to understanding the Nixon presidency. This approach is similar to the post-revisionist school of Cold War scholars where, rather than viewing Nixon from his resignation backwards, scholars now approach his presidency from a more centered perspective. By looking beyond Watergate, scholars are finding a Nixonian domestic policy that left lasting impacts on three key domestic issues: civil rights, environmental protection, and social welfare. Still, at the heart of this domestic policy lies the divisive figure of Richard Nixon himself, which engenders differing approaches. Since his resignation in 1974, most scholars have argued that Nixon's domestic policy was designed to maximize his own political capital as opposed to doing what was best for Americans. However, the means by which Nixon gained this capital, as well as its uses, are points of ambiguity among scholars.

This article focuses on four key aspects of President Nixon's domestic policy as evaluated in the historiography. Firstly, the most substantial portion of this article examines the scholarship on Nixon's civil rights efforts. This is one of the most heavily debated topics of his

[2] Joan Hoff, *Nixon Reconsidered* (New York: BasicBooks, 1994), 8.

domestic policy, as many scholars disagree on Nixon's true intentions and enthusiasm. Secondly, this article discusses Nixon's domestic policy with regards to the environment. Many scholars remark that Nixon's contributions to the environmentalist agenda are primarily positive, but not without their political purpose. In the area of civil rights, by contrast, Nixon's actions are largely looked upon positively by scholars, while at the same time serving as an exemplar of one of Nixon's more prominent and long-lasting contributions, which has nonetheless been overshadowed by Watergate. Thirdly, this article explores studies of Nixon's approach to social welfare, and more particularly, the Family Assistance Plan. This section is included to show various scholars' acknowledgment that Nixon rarely places personal interest ahead of political importance, and how he ultimately paid the price and was forced to play a political game for social welfare. Lastly, this article brings forth the very people for whom Nixon was trying to win political capital: the Nixon-dubbed "silent majority." Scholars agree that this group represents the bulk of Nixon's political base during his presidency, but it also reveals those not in his base: an outgroup or select few whom Nixon hoped to win over with his policies. It was the silent majority that gave Nixon his base from which to win political capital. However, the silent majority also helped Nixon identify his political enemies as the "out-group" and seek to gain their support to advance his domestic policies. Thus, the silent majority provided Nixon with a political blueprint, allowing him to target his enemies to either gain their support or take them down to strengthen his backing from his base. Taken together, these four points offer different contexts where scholars have debated the effectiveness and overall purpose of Nixon's quest for political capital.

Civil Rights

One of the most significant achievements of Nixon's domestic policy were his efforts directed towards the civil rights movement, specifically for the African-American community. In essence, Nixon judged the current federal effort towards prominent civil rights issues, such as desegregation of schools and equal job opportunities, as inadequate and in need of a fresh new approach. In his book *The Nixon Effect*, political analyst Douglas E. Schoen describes Nixon's civil rights approaches from the beginning of his presidency:

> When Nixon entered the White House, the desegregation of Southern schools was proceeding at a snail's pace. The fact that he had reduced the percentage of black children attending all-black schools from 70 percent to 8 percent by the time he left office in 1974 makes the record crystal clear: Richard Nixon desegregated more schools than all other Presidents combined.[3]

But was this a matter of deliberate effort by Nixon? Or was Nixon riding the waves of change that built up during the democratic reign of the sixties? Schoen argues that Nixon was able to obtain relative success with civil rights policy by applying conservative, Republican principles of governance, grouped in with a federalism-based approach which allowed the states to govern autonomously.[4] Nixon's individualist, Republican approach to state governance allowed states to work towards desegregation at their own pace, so long as it did not interfere with federal mandates. Schoen's argument in favor of Nixon's efforts towards civil rights matches that of author Tom Wicker, known best as a political reporter and columnist for the New York Times. In his book *One of Us: Richard Nixon and the American Dream (1991)*, Wicker states that "Nixon held it as a guiding principle that he had to pursue a strong, or 'liberal,' domestic policy…if he was to have the political leeway to conduct a strong, effective foreign policy."[5] Nixon, as Wicker

[3] Douglas E. Schoen, *The Nixon Effect* (New York: Encounter Books, 2016), 28.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Tom Wicker, *One of Us: Richard Nixon and the American Dream* (New York: Random House, 1991), 413.

points out, was not afraid to embrace Democratic social approaches in order to obtain the political capital he would need for his foreign policy plans.

This is where Wicker and Schoen's arguments diverge. Both would agree that Nixon's domestic policy towards civil rights was intentional, yet the root of the intention is a point of discrepancy between the two authors. Pushing further, Wicker describes Nixon as being cognizant of the Democratic and Republican parties' divergent reputations regarding civil rights, pointing out that it was Nixon's defeat in 1960 that inspired him to craft a better Republican approach to civil rights—one that copied largely from the Democrats' platform.[6] Both authors use the example of schools using busses to aid desegregation efforts in the South within their descriptions of Nixon's civil rights contributions. When the 1964 Civil Rights Act was drafted, Vice President Hubert Humphrey proposed amendments banning the act from being interpreted to require the forced bussing of children to schools with different racial populations. However, by 1966, the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare wanted the success of desegregation to be measured by numbers. This meant that records would be kept on exactly how many children had been integrated, and, in certain cases, the only way to satisfy pre-set targets was through bussing.[7]

According to Schoen, however, Nixon did not see bussing (which he likened to forced integration) as a real solution to racial inequality, let alone a way to foster harmonious relations between African-Americans and whites.[8] However, leading up to 1974, bussing became not only a social but a political issue. In 1971, Nixon attempted to propose a temporary prohibition on bussing, but it did not pass the Senate. However, in 1974, the Supreme Court ruled that bussing

[6] Wicker, 417.
[7] Schoen, 27.
[8] Ibid.

could no longer take place between school districts unless it was proven that these districts had been deliberately drawn to create segregation. Schoen uses this event to draw attention to the fact that many journalists went after Nixon for his resistance to bussing, as they viewed it as a way to track the progress of desegregation. Ultimately, Schoen points out that journalists did not realize the positive impact Nixon was having on desegregating the school system, as he was able to reduce the percentage of African-American children attending "black-only" schools from 70 percent to 8 percent.[9]

Wicker takes a different approach to Schoen's "success-behind-the scenes" argument. Looking back at Nixon's 1968 campaign, Wicker describes Nixon as being guilty of having two minds on civil rights issues. One mind is described as "anti-segregation," and the other as "anti-busing."[10] Wicker attributes this divide to Nixon's view that bussing did not promote desegregation, but rather an institutional racial balance: "He believed busing orders were designed to achieve racial balance [and] thus were not protection for the constitutional rights of blacks so much as an infringement on the constitutional rights of those opposed to sweeping remedies for de jure segregation."[11] Despite Nixon's opposition to bussing, he was still determined to enforce the law, as the public still largely supported bussing. However, Nixon's opposition to bussing also ushered in multiple allegations that he was racist and secretly supporting Southern attempts to cling to segregation. Wicker concludes that Nixon's opposition to bussing was not just his prerogative but a means of garnering support from Southern voters, while his view of bussing as not promoting proper segregation was a means of gaining support from the Northern states. Despite Nixon's take on the bussing dilemma never being able to make

[9] Schoen, 28.
[10] Wicker, 417.
[11] Ibid.

a significant impact compared to his other domestic policies, Nixon is still credited with the success of civil rights policies such as further desegregation policies and affirmative action. To close the analysis on Nixon's approach to civil rights, John A. Farrell, author of the biography *Richard Nixon: A Life*, casts a different light on the intentions and attitudes of Nixon's civil rights work. Farrell states that "on no domestic issue was President Nixon's behavior so revealing. His efforts to fulfill the nation's obligation to black Americans, while simultaneously securing the votes of disgruntled ethnic voters and white Southerners, offer a prism through which to watch convictions meld with calculation."[12] After the Supreme Court's decisions in 1968 and 1969 ordered the South to change its segregationist ways, the task of enforcing the rulings fell to incoming President Nixon. However, Farrell argues that the divisiveness of the issue of civil rights—a polarizing topic throughout America—existed within the White House as well. Nixon felt caught between implementing the necessary, effective changes the law required, and appeasing voters in the South who had helped him clinch the nomination and win the 1968 election.[13] Farrell quotes Leonard Garment, Counselor to the President, as stating, "there had been promises made to lighten the load of court-ordered desegregation."[14] As a result of Nixon's divisiveness towards Civil Rights, the administration spent about two years shuffling individuals around administrative roles in the Health, Education, and Welfare Department, resulting in an apparent retreat from a firm stance regarding desegregation of the South.

This hesitation by the Nixon administration, as Farrell (much like Wicker) points out, caused many vocal critics to emerge, particularly around the topic of desegregating schools. These critics accused the President and his administration of fulfilling Nixon's Southern strategy,

[12] John A. Farrell, *Richard Nixon: The life* (New York: Vintage Books, 2017), 384.
[13] Farrell, *Richard Nixon*, 384.
[14] Ibid.

wherein they were trading the futures of black children for political advantage in the South.[15] Along with citing the President's foes, Farrell also uses the President's own words against him to highlight the divide between what the law required and how President Nixon truly felt towards bussing and desegregation. In a memo to his senior aides, Nixon wrote: "Segregated white education is probably superior to education in which there is too great a degree of integration of inferior black students with the white students."[16] In revealing these remarks, Farrell creates an image in support of the overall argument that Nixon valued gaining political capital, particularly in the South, over fulfilling civil rights laws. Thus, Nixon's profoundly racist convictions, as revealed in this quote, establish the view that his motivation for promoting desegregation was not based in moral reparations, but rather in a desire to gain political support.

Farrell's biography of Nixon aims to be comprehensive not just in its page count, but also in its approaches to Nixon himself. In the concluding pages of his twentieth chapter, Farrell shifts his tone and explains the overall success and positive change that President Nixon brought to civil rights in America. Farrell chooses to highlight the views of these changes by quoting Carolyn Payton**,** one of the few women—and African Americans—on Nixon's staff. Payton stated: "Mr. Nixon was elected on a tide of reaction. There was a good deal of space to the political right of him that he might have occupied, but did not."[17] Farrell uses Payton's words as they summarize what someone in Nixon's administration felt towards his civil rights policies once they were implemented. Her words also show what at least one person who falls in the intersectional categories of the civil rights movement felt. Payton's words serve as a landmark within the discourse surrounding Nixon and civil rights. Is she correct in suggesting that Nixon

[15] Farrell, 385.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Farrell, 394.

was simply riding the momentum of change from the sixties, however? Or did he have an active hand in crafting civil rights policies during his tenure?

The answer can be narrowed down to a combination of riding the momentum with intention as to which direction he was going. Schoen displays Nixon as someone quite deliberate with his actions and beliefs, as does Wicker; they portray a president who was looking to have a dualistic policy, one that appealed to a segregated South and a progressive North. Lastly, Farrell holds nothing back by revealing Nixon's occasionally blatantly racist language, and argues that he valued civil rights for their potential to provide him with political gain, rather than for the sake of upholding lawful equality. Farrell displays Nixon as both "convicting and calculating" towards Civil Rights, but overall having a lasting positive impact.[18] Taken together, these authors show the fragmented scholarly understanding of Nixon's approach to civil rights. Each author brings forth the same fact: that Nixon was unclear on his approach due to his overall goal of finding policies that would be the most politically effective. As a result, his domestic policy tended to suffer. However, what he managed to be successful with throughout is maximizing the political capital he could gain from whatever issue he was handling.

Environmentalism

Nixon's other main domestic policy was his approach to the environment. His environmental politics are exemplary of his using his policy to gain political capital for his re-election, as well as for an added boost to his approval ratings in the face of fallout from the Vietnam War. In his book *Nixon and the Environment*, Brooks J. Flippen, a professor of history at Southeastern Oklahoma State University, acknowledges that Nixon didn't have much environmental background and not much personal interest in the environment, but he was an astute politician

[18] Farrell, 384.

and realized that there was an environmentally-minded electorate to be won over. Flippen writes: "Environmentalism, it appeared, was particularly strong in critical electoral college states, including Florida, California, New York, and much of New England."[19] Nixon also recognized that many young people backed the new environmentalist agenda emerging in American culture, and since young people were more likely to be against the Vietnam War, he saw a way to broaden his appeal. "Indeed, with polls indicating that the environment was a key issue among the nation's youth, [the environment] offered a chance to score points with an important demographic group, a voting block not traditionally allied with Nixon," explains Flippen.[20] The great public outcry pertaining to the environment created an opportunity for political gain and Nixon took full advantage of it. According to Flippen, Nixon "ended up having one of the most outstanding environmental records of any president to this day."[21]

Early in his administration, Nixon made a major address on the environment. His administration crafted a thirty-seven-point agenda that covered almost all aspects of environmental protection.[22] Included in his plans were: strengthening air pollution laws, tightening emission standards, and spending more money for waste treatment facilities. Many of his points became legislation months later. However, Democrats kept pushing for a more centralized organization within the government to coordinate environmental protection. A government organization tasked with focusing on the environment was not Nixon's own idea, but he realized the tremendous support it had in Congress; he decided to get involved and take it

[19] Brooks J. Flippen, *Nixon and the Environment* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2012), 9.
[20] Flippen, *Nixon and the Environment,* 8.
[21] Brooks J. Flippen, "Environmentalist or Pragmatist," interview by Nathan Connolly, *Back Story*, January 25, 2019, audio, 20:00, https://www.backstoryradio.org/shows/nixon-beyond-watergate/#segments.
[22] Flippen, *Nixon and the Environment,* 131.

over.[23] The result of this takeover was the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Nixon, who wanted to take advantage of this success, was sure to get as much public attention as possible for adding his name to the policy. But despite Nixon's attempts to take full credit for the government's work on the environment, he often found himself battling for credit with the congressional Democrats. Flippen draws much attention to the impact that the competition between Nixon and Edmund Muskie, a senator from Maine, had on Nixon's long-term environmental approach. Discussed at length in chapter four (entitled "You Can't Out-Muskie Muskie") of his book, Flippen notes that every time Nixon proposed an environmental policy or bill, Muskie and the Democrats would out-propose him: "If Nixon proposed 10 billion dollars for waste treatment facility, Muskie came back with 15 or 20. Nixon really felt that he wasn't getting the credit that he deserved."[24] Being of a competitive nature, Nixon did a lot for environmental policy, including creating the EPA and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), supporting and signing the Clean Air Act, and setting deadlines for reducing automobile emission target levels.[25] These policies and bills are regarded as highly important in American environmental history, but because he felt that he was not getting the credit, Nixon later began to back away from issues pertaining to the environment.[26] Animated by political pragmatism rather than sincere beliefs, values, or a desire to do good, Nixon once again backed away from strong policy in favor of political gain.

Douglas E. Schoen, discussed earlier, takes a slightly different approach to Nixon's environmental policies. Where Flippen concludes that Nixon backed away from environmental

[23] Ibid.
[24] Flippen, Interview.
[25] Schoen, 48.
[26] Flippen, *Nixon and the Environment,* 132-33.

policies due to lack of acknowledgment among voters, Schoen argues that Nixon used environmentalism as a means to reach young and Democratic voters while still trying to please his Republican base. "[Nixon] did not come to the environmental issue with any real passion. He had not regarded the environment as a pressing issue before it came onto the public agenda," writes Schoen.[27] As the environmental movement gained momentum, Nixon was slow to respond to its message. Schoen gives much of the credit to John Ehrlichman, Nixon's counsel and assistant for domestic affairs, as the one who did the most to get the environment onto Nixon's radar: "Ehrlichman's advocacy finally woke up Nixon to the issue's importance, though to Nixon, the importance was political more than anything else."[28] However strong Nixon's desire to use domestic policy for political gain, he could not afford to accrue political support from Democrats while losing support from his Republican base. Many of Nixon's critics point out that he vetoed the Clean Water Act despite generally supporting the goals of the law. Nixon's reasoning for vetoing the bill when it came to his desk had to do with his objection to its $18 billion price tag.[29] Eighteen billion wasn't spendable within the time frame for which it was intended, and the cost of an act this expensive did not match Nixon's reputation as a fiscal conservative; Schoen speculates that the Democrats, aware of Nixon's sights being set on political gain, set the cost deliberately high to force Nixon into a politically unpopular move. Schoen states several times throughout his book that Nixon's veto had nothing to do with his views on the issue.[30] He writes, "As Nixon thought of it, when given a choice between 'smoke and jobs,' he would take jobs. His approach, which [environmentalists] saw as being hopelessly

[27] Schoen, 48.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Schoen, 49.
[30] Ibid.

compromised, is responsible for the most important set of environmental regulations ever written in America."[31] True to the historiographical trends, environmentalists' accusations of Nixon being compromised reveal that despite creating positive lasting change, he valued political gain most of all.

Given the perspectives of Flippen and Schoen, Nixon had little personal intention or attachment to environmental policy; he merely saw the environmental issue as a strategic tool that he could use to gain more political capital. With the Vietnam War being such a divisive issue in America, Nixon sought to distract the public with environmental policies, while still trying to stay true to his Republican morals. As Wicker notes, "Nixon the politician undoubtedly did seize upon the environment…while Nixon the capitalist harbored reservations about the cost to business and the possible loss of jobs."[32] Nixon, Schoen concludes, provided a template for how to claim the positions of the center and even some of the Left on an environmental policy issue, and then use them to strengthen Republicans' stance against unpopular proposals of Democratic opponents.[33] Towards the end of his presidency, Nixon began to calculate that people would always say that they cared about the environment, but they would vote on other issues.

Social Welfare Reform and the Family Assistance Plan

What sets social welfare apart in the Nixon context is that, as some scholars argue, Nixon had a vested interest in this category of policy, which transcended his approach of looking to gain political capital. Evidence of Nixon's interest in social welfare appears in his history of

[31] Ibid.
[32] Wicker, 516.
[33] Schoen, 50.

proposing more ambitious programs than he enacted.[34] Ken Hughes, a specialist on the American presidency, in an article published by the Miller Center at the University of Virginia, focuses primarily on Nixon's ambitious welfare proposals, which faced great difficulty being passed.[35] Much of the difficulty derived from the fact that his reforms were seen as either too liberal and therefore unable to make it past his administration, or else would not make it past Congress because they had been initiated by a Republican president.

One aspect of social welfare reform that Nixon did almost successfully pass was the merging of a work requirement with the Family Assistance Plan (FAP). The change was received positively overall, although some negative comments came from a small minority. These comments reflected annoyance that Nixon was, in effect, trying to continue the welfare state under a different guise. Some conservative commentators worried that Nixon was letting mothers with dependent children off too easily by not insisting on work requirements for them as well. In his book *Richard Nixon and His America*, American historian Herbert S. Parmet remarks that "over four hundred newspapers were surveyed at the White House and, of that total, just five objected to FAP as an 'insignificant attack on the root problems of poverty.'"[36] The press was with him; and with that, Nixon was looking at significant gain in polls and his approval rating as a result of FAP. Both Hughes and Parmet largely agree on the good intentions and nature of FAP, but these authors diverge in their thinking when it comes to the context behind its failure.

Hughes is keen to point out that FAP was "bold, innovative [and] even radical," yet he sees it as another political tool in Nixon's belt. Using words from the diary of H.R. Haldeman (Nixon's Chief of Staff), Hughes reveals that Nixon wanted "to be sure [FAP is] killed by

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[34] Ken Hughes, "Richard Nixon: Domestic Issues," Miller Center, University of Virginia. Accessed April 13, 2019, https://millercenter.org/president/nixon/domestic-affairs.
[35] Hughes, "Domestic Issues."
[36] Herbert S. Parmet, *Richard Nixon and His America* (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1990), 553.

Democrats and that we make a big play for it," but he did not want it to pass; the budget could not afford it.[37] Nixon played his political hand to suggest that he largely supported FAP through and through, but Haldeman's comments, as quoted by Hughes, reveal that Nixon supported the *effects* of FAP but not its price tag. However, Nixon—ever the pragmatist—still tried to implement FAP in some way, and used it as a political target for Democrats to shoot down, therefore making the Republicans look like the party that had sought change but was denied. Nonetheless, the failure of FAP boosted Nixon's polls.

In his analysis of the failure of FAP, Parmet concludes that "the mechanism of the American legislative system was incapable." Quoting sociologist Nathan Glazer, who spoke of FAP as "the most enlightened and thoughtful legislation to have been introduced in the field of welfare in some decades," Parmet believes that FAP was largely meant to succeed at first, but as it lay in political limbo for too long, Nixon and the public lost interest.[38] This was certainly true for the beginning of FAP; there had been genuine urgings from Nixon for its adoption. Parmet remarks that "what happened to FAP is an instructive case study, neither completely positive nor completely negative. It illustrated the barriers that doomed progress even in the presence of relatively substantial bipartisan consensus."[39] American society, as Nixon and his administration ultimately came to appreciate, had become so complex that political movement, even if generally assumed to be favorable and necessary, became virtually impossible. As a result of congressional gridlock on FAP, Nixon, as well as the public, grew weary of discussing the welfare reforms associated with it. With little political capital left to gain from FAP, Nixon moved on. Charles Colson, Special Counsel to the President, agreed with Nixon, stating that "as long as the

[37] Hughes, "Domestic Issues."
[38] Parmet, 556.
[39] Ibid.

Democrats were on the left, it made little sense for the administration to move toward the center."[40]

The Silent Majority

With the primary focus of this article being Nixon's strategies for gaining domestic political support, it is logical to discuss his direct approach to American voters. American historian Matt Lassiter, author of *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South*, serves as an expert on analyzing Nixon's political base. In November of 1969, Nixon gave a speech designed to address the nation, discussing both domestic and foreign policy. Leading up to this speech was a time of great unrest in America, including urban uprisings, Martin Luther King Jr's assassination, other contentious issues with the civil rights movement, and significant political pressure regarding and public backlash against the Vietnam War. Nixon said in this speech:

> So tonight, to you, the great silent majority of my fellow Americans, I ask for your support. I pledged in my campaign for the presidency to end the war in a way that we could win the peace. I have initiated a plan of action which will enable me to keep that pledge. The more support I can have from the American people, the sooner that pledge can be redeemed.[41]

Despite the great unrest in America, what stands out most prominently in this speech, according to Lassiter, is the term "silent majority." The significance of this term is that, as Lassiter describes, it is a "populist label that tries to define the great center of the country against the alleged extremes."[42] Nixon recognized this center as people who work hard and play by the rules, who don't protest, who don't riot, and who don't commit crimes. This definition was clear outreach and encouragement for how Americans should approach domestic policy. In other words, Nixon believed that most Americans were not what people imagined civil rights

[40] Ibid., 559.

[41] Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, *The Great Silent Majority: Nixon's 1969 Speech on Vietnamization* (Texas: A&M University Press, 2014), 13.

[42] Matthew D. Lassiter, "Who is the 'Silent Majority?'," interview by Brian Balogh, *Back Story*, January 25, 2019, audio 8:45, https://www.backstoryradio.org/shows/nixon-beyond-watergate/#segments.

protesters and anti-war demonstrators to be. According to Lassiter, the term was not new; when Nixon referred to the great and silent majority in November 1969, it was an updated version of the group that he called the "forgotten Americans" in the 1968 election.[43]

Who comprised this group that Nixon valued so highly? Lassiter describes the creation of the term as an appeal to white voters, hidden beneath color-blind language. Nixon did not explicitly say the group was primarily made up of white voters; in fact, Nixon often insisted that black voters were part of the silent majority too. Essentially, Nixon was trying to create a political coalition that crossed the class boundary between working- and upper-middle-class white voters.[44] Lassiter believes the most interesting thing about the silent majority concept is that Nixon applied it to garner support during the fallout from the Vietnam War, but it gained most political traction as white Americans began to mobilize against court-ordered bussing and other progressive policies. The concept was taken over by the very people to whom Nixon was trying to appeal. Grassroots organizations around the country started titling themselves with variations of the silent majority theme. With Nixon's overt intention being to unite the country on a more moderate stance, and covert intention being to appeal to white Southern voters, the silent majority concept became lost in translation as its ambiguity caused many people to make it their own. Many Americans began identifying as members of the silent majority that was tired of being pushed around by judges and the civil rights activists.[45] Lassiter notes how the concept took root more in domestic politics than it did in foreign policy, despite efforts by Nixon and his administration to focus the enthusiasm on foreign policy. However, it truly resonated more in

[43] Matthew D. Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2006), 232.
[44] Lassiter, *The Silent Majority*, 5-6.
[45] Lassiter, *The Silent Majority*, 3.

terms of urban and suburban politics on the domestic front.[46] By using social and cultural history as leads in his political analysis of Nixon, Lassiter brings a relatively new approach to the historiography of Nixon's presidency. This approach yields astute political commentary that is rooted in the nuances of social and cultural history, therefore showing that these genres of history do not have to be mutually exclusive.

The silent majority concept started out as Nixon's plan to bring Americans to embrace a more moderate approach domestically, with the hope that domestic moderates would go easier on his foreign policy agenda. However, the silent majority concept became more of an identity for Nixon's White, Southern, Republican base than it did for other demographic groups. The concept was a populist idea that spread the perception that most people are on one side, and their enemies are on the extremes.[47] In the context of Nixon's desire for political capital, the silent majority created a target group from whom he could easily gain support, while also creating a group of "others" whose support would require more work to win. Nonetheless, the silent majority helped Nixon name both his base and his "enemies", thus allowing him to play to the key issues of each group in order to maximize his political capital. Along with its fresh approach and interesting conclusion, Lassiter's book also reinforces the theme of Nixon as a strategist, which is consistent throughout the historiography. It should also be noted that Lassiter's approach is used alone (as opposed to coupling it with other sources) as it best defines Nixon's political base and does so in a unique way that places this historical context in a more contemporary understanding.

Conclusion

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[46] Lassiter, Interview.
[47] Lassiter, Interview.

In his book *The Presidency of Gerald R. Ford*, American historian John Robert Greene outlines the legacies that Nixon's domestic policies left for the former Vice President. He states that "the nation that Ford inherited was saddled with more than the direct consequences of Nixon's policies. His desire to end the turmoil of the 1960s had led to a repression of dissent unparalleled in modern American history."[48] Nixon's administration, according to Greene, conducted policy with a bunker mentality, full of chauvinistic defensiveness and self-righteous intolerance of criticism. Coupled with this mindset, the "us versus them" mindset that Nixon created from his desire for political capital prevailed on the domestic front. Since his resignation in 1974, most scholars have argued that the domestic policy of President Nixon sought principally to gain political capital. Throughout most of his domestic policy efforts, Nixon never ceased trying to bring about what he viewed as positive change. To this day, historians and political commentators see Nixon's civil rights work and environmental policies largely as successes for America; his welfare reforms garnered enthusiasm from Nixon himself and/or his administration, but were rendered useless in the theater of American politics. As Joan Hoff says in her book *Nixon Reconsidered*, "these democratic programs may be remembered longer than his currently better-known activities in the realm of foreign policy, and they may even minimize his negative Watergate image."[49] This article has presented Nixon's domestic policy in a context not based in either success or failure, but in the context of how they relate to Nixon's search for political capital. Despite the divisive nature of Nixon's presidency, it is clear that the next step in analyzing Nixon is to, in Hoff's words, "learn rather than lament."[50]

[48] John Robert Greene, *The Presidency of Gerald R. Ford* (University Press of Kansas, 1995), 20.
[49] Hoff, 144.
[50] Hoff, 346.

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