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VIEWPOINTS

REVISING NIXON IN DC: NIXON FOUNDATION STILL CAMPAIGNING

George Derek Musgrove | Sep 2, 2014

As a Washington, DC, resident who is currently working on a study of race and

democracy in the nation's capital, I was interested to hear that the National Archives and Records Administration and the Richard Nixon Foundation would sponsor a panel titled "Another Historic First: Richard Nixon and DC Home Rule" on May 16, 2014. The panel, moderated by Salisbury State University professor of history Dean Kotlowski, featured former Nixon White House aides Egil "Bud" Krogh, Sallyanne Payton, and Donald Santarelli. I found the panel particularly intriguing because I had just read a brilliant dissertation that used Krogh and Santarelli's records.¹

The event turned out to be an attempt to revise Nixon's legacy in the fields of civil rights and DC self-determination. The participants spoke with a single voice. Nixon, they argued, loved Washington, DC, and did all he could to make the city safer and more economically prosperous, and to expand self-determination for its residents.

Though poor history, the panel was a fascinating case study of the worldview of the Nixon Administration, and the dangers of recent political history in which participants often campaign for their version of events long after they have transpired.

When Nixon was sworn into office in January 1969, Washington, DC, was in a sorry state. The city's ill-trained and generally racist police force (many officers were young white men recruited from West Virginia and South Carolina, the home states of the chairmen of the DC Committees in the Senate and House, respectively) had lost nearly all black public support, and crime had skyrocketed. The U Street, 14th Street, 7th Street, and H Street business districts remained burned-out shells, a stark reminder of the riot that had followed the assassination of Martin Luther King the previous April. And segregationists continued to rule the city from Capitol Hill, constantly seeking to undermine the presidentially appointed mayor and city council, and denying residents the franchise in all elections but those for president and school board.



Byron E. Schumaker, photographer. Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum

President Nixon conferring with Mayor Walter Washington and Police Chief J. W. Wilson in Washington, DC, in October 1971.

Nixon, the panelists claimed, set out to change all that, and they presented some compelling evidence to back up their assertions. In one of his first speeches as president, Nixon stated his support for home rule—a local government elected by city residents—and before he left office, the city secured the right to elect a nonvoting delegate to the House of Representatives (1970) and a mayor and city council (1973). Also during his tenure, Nixon worked with the city to increase funds for the Metropolitan Police Department, create the DC Superior Court system, redevelop Pennsylvania Avenue, and to rebuild the riot corridors.

The panelists' story is an important take on the 37th president's relationship to the city. Except for a recent dissertation by Lauren Pearlman, and a study of the city's subway system by Zachary Schrag, historians have generally neglected the Nixon administration's role in the critically important events that washed over the capital city in the late 1960s and early 1970s. It is also an important layer in the complicated story of the Nixon Administration which, to use Assistant to the President on Domestic Affairs Bob Ehrlichman's words, adopted a number of "liberal zigs" and "conservative zags" that make it difficult to characterize his policy trajectory.

But rather than enrich and complicate the existing narrative, the panelists turned it on its head, emphasizing the zigs and ignoring the zags. To achieve this feat, the panelists did two things.

First, they dismissed many DC residents' negative assessment of Nixon's treatment of the city's black residents. Absent from the discussion were Nixon's efforts to impose anti-crime policies widely rejected by many blacks and city leaders (like "no-knock" warrants and preventive detention), the failure of the administration's efforts to rebuild the riot corridors, and its efforts to water down home rule legislation at the request of local business and white civic groups concerned about black control of city government.²

Indeed, the panelists failed to recognize the people they disagreed with as legitimate players in DC politics, much as they had when they were White House staff. In a revealing comment, Payton noted that Nixon respected and "got along" with "people who ran institutions," not "advocates" whom he viewed as "irresponsible." The president preferred to work with "responsible" black leaders, she continued, like the (presidentially appointed) Mayor Walter Washington and James Cheek, the president of Howard University (whose budget was set by the federal government)—that is, black leaders inclined to agree with him or who he could control.

Second, the panelists argued that the Nixon administration was the prime mover in DC politics—that it took the lead in defending the city's interests from mendacious segregationists in Congress and irresponsible black rabble-rousers. This describes a role for the administration that was far in excess of the one it actually played. Indeed, it ignores the fact that in some notable cases Nixon took credit for the gains of the activists he sought to undermine.³

On this latter point, take the issue of Nixon's support for home rule. The panelists repeatedly argued that Nixon voiced his support for home rule immediately upon taking the oath of office and worked assiduously to bring it about until 1973, when he succeeded in this regard. In actuality, Nixon stated, in his 1969 address on the subject, "I . . . support home rule, but I consider the timing of that effort the key. . . . For the present, I will seek within the present system to strengthen the role of the local government in the solution of local problems."⁴ In the following four years, he did little to pressure Congress to enact home rule legislation. Indeed, he undermined the strength of the local government by appointing a Republican chair of the overwhelmingly Democratic city's City Council (then replacing him in 1972 when he proved to be an effective advocate for local interests), scheming to fire prominent black city employees whom he found politically distasteful, and seizing some of the city's law enforcement responsibilities from the mayor. Meanwhile, local activists and the black voters of South Carolina's 6th District defeated the chair of the House Committee on the District of Columbia, Rep. John McMillian (D-SC), *the* man in Congress who had blocked home rule legislation for nearly two decades. When McMillian's successor, Rep. Charles Diggs (D-MI), worked with those same activists to craft home rule legislation, Nixon worked with the bill's opponents to water it down.

Such a sanitized view of the past should be expected of participants in historical events who have a stake in a certain point of view. It is human nature to place ourselves at the center of the story, to justify our actions and remember ourselves in the best possible light. Political historians should be particularly keen to this fact, as political actors tend to campaign for their version of events long after they have transpired. The Richard Nixon Foundation has been uniquely aggressive in this regard, drawing the ire of historians and NARA for seeking

to whitewash the Watergate scandal and other Nixon misdeeds.⁵ Though it appears to have ceased this more egregious type of advocacy since NARA acquired the Nixon Library in 2007, the foundation nonetheless appears intent on presenting the administration in its best possible light—a task, granted, to which most presidential foundations are devoted.⁶ Stories like those told by the May 16 panelists, though misleading, are nonetheless valuable to the historian. They give us insight into the worldview of historical actors and provide fascinating studies of how those actors labor to shape historical memory. The danger, of course, lies in the foundation’s efforts to pass off their stories as history. For the former to become the latter, they must be coupled with an exploration of the historical context and a careful weighing of other subjects’ recollections. Would that the May 16 event had done so.

George Derek Musgrove is an associate professor of history at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. He is the author of *Rumor, Repression, and Racial Politics* (2012) and is currently working on a history of race and democracy in Washington, DC, with Chris Myers Asch.

Notes

1 Lauren Pearlman, “Democracy’s Capital: Local Protest, National Politics, and the Struggle for Civil Rights in Washington, D.C., 1933-1978,” unpublished dissertation, Yale University, 2013.

2 See Pearlman, “Democracy’s Capital.” Tom Sherwood and Harry Jaffe, *Dream City: Race Power, and the Decline of Washington, DC* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994).

3 See Sherwood and Jaffe, *Dream City*. Michael Fauntroy, *Home Rule or House Rule: Congress and the Erosion of Local Governance in the District of Columbia* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2003). Howard Gillette, *Between Justice and Beauty: Race, Planning, and the Failure of Urban Policy in Washington, DC* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006).

4 Nixon quoted in Pearlman, *Democracy’s Capital*, 217.

5 “Nixon Library Loses Watergate Whitewash,” *Washington Post*, July 11, 2007.

6 “Presidential Libraries: Are they Valuable Archives or Wasteful Monuments?” *CQ Researcher*, v17 n11, March 16, 2007.



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