A historian puts Richard Nixon in context

April 30, 2017 12:00 AM

By Glenn C. Altschuler

As he presided over a Cabinet meeting on Aug. 6, 1974, President Richard Nixon sounded combative. But everyone in the room knew that his resignation was imminent. “All that talent — all those flaws,” Caspar Weinberger whispered to James Schlesinger. “No morality,” George H.W. Bush said to himself, “Caring for no one and yet doing so much.”

Historians have ratified these judgments. In “Richard Nixon: The Life,” author John Farrell, the former White House correspondent for the Boston Globe and the author of biographies of Clarence Darrow and “Tip” O’Neill, endorses them as well.

That said, Mr. Farrell has captured and conveyed the essential Nixon in an elegantly written, expertly researched, commanding and compelling rise and fall narrative. His Richard Nixon is the best biography of our 37th president we have, or are likely to have.

Mr. Farrell gives Nixon his due. Acknowledging that Nixon’s aim was to reduce the support of working class whites for the Democrats, who held commanding majorities in the House and Senate during his presidency, Mr. Farrell reminds us that Nixon signed landmark environmental legislation, initiated affirmative action policies, and persuaded Southerners to desegregate their public schools. And, of course, the “opening” to “Red China” by the quintessential Cold Warrior was a transformative event in diplomacy.

Mr. Farrell demonstrates, however, that Nixon subordinated just about everything and everybody to his political self-interest. He knew that neither Jerry Voorhis nor Helen Gahagan Douglas, his Democratic opponents in the elections of 1946 and 1950, were Communists. But, he later confessed, he lied about their records because “the important thing is to win.”

To win, Mr. Farrell writes, Nixon validated the feelings of millions of Americans that blacks were lazy, ignorant, riot-prone ingrates. In what he deems Nixon’s “most reprehensible” act, Mr. Farrell reveals that in 1968 Nixon secretly directed surrogates to sabotage the Vietnam peace (and prolonged the conflict for four years) so that Hubert Humphrey, the Democratic candidate for president, could not get
credit for ending the war.

To make certain he would be re-elected in 1972, Mr. Farrell writes, Nixon conspired with his aides “about wiretaps, dirty tricks, break-ins, hush money, clemency,” and ordered the CIA to get the FBI to stop investigating the “incident” at the Watergate. And he was fully prepared to let his colleagues take the fall for him.

Mr. Farrell reads into the record Nixon’s love for his mother, wife and daughters; his kindness toward Lee Atwater, a campaign strategist who was dying of cancer; and the gracious, handwritten letter he sent to Caroline and John F. Kennedy Jr. after their visit to the White House. Mr. Farrell leaves no doubt, however, that RN was an insecure, self-pitying, petty, vulgar and vindictive loner. Nixon refused to attend the official opening of the Kennedy Center, complaining about “the orgasm over this architectural monstrosity” and telling H.R. Haldeman, “If I’m assassinated, I want you to have them play ‘Dante’s Inferno’ and have Lawrence Welk produce it.” And, Nixon’s expletive-filled rants against Ivy Leaguers, the Georgetown set, journalists and Jews, Mr. Farrell implies, seem heartfelt.

In the two decades before his death in 1994, Nixon sought, often desperately, to rehabilitate his reputation as a geopolitical visionary who was subject to a double standard by opinion-makers. It was — and remains — a hard sell, with the “silent majority” he anointed as his constituency as well as with elites.

While other former presidents had airports named after them, Mr. Farrell points out, the best Nixon got was a gym in Kentucky and a stretch of highway in Yorba Linda. In all likelihood, John Farrell’s unsparing biography will reinforce the perception that he was one of our darkest, most divisive and destructive presidents.

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