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Opinion

OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

What Nixon Could Teach Trump About Losing

By Mark K. Updegrove
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President-elect John F. Kennedy shakes hands with Richard Nixon after winning the 1960 election. Associated Press


Austin, Tex. — Richard M. Nixon, the first president to resign from office, was hardly a beacon of moral integrity. Nor was Nixon above demagoguery on the campaign trail, infamously fanning the flames of Communist paranoia during the McCarthy era by unjustly painting his opponent in his 1950 Senate race, the California congresswoman Helen Gahagan Douglas, as the “Pink Lady.”

But the 37th president, as controversial as he was, offers a good example for Donald J. Trump on the importance of putting the country ahead of one’s ego and personal ambition on Election Day.


When Mr. Trump, amid his claims that the voting process is rigged, was asked in Wednesday’s debate if he would accept a losing result in the coming election, he responded by spitting in the face of American democracy. “I will tell you at the time. I’ll keep you in suspense,” he said glibly, as though presaging a reality-show cliffhanger. The next day he told an audience in Ohio that he would accept the results of the election — “if I win.”

He would do well to look at the election of 1960, which pitted Nixon, the Republican presidential nominee and sitting vice president, against his Democratic rival, the Massachusetts senator John F. Kennedy. The two candidates waged admirable campaigns, which included squaring off in four substantive, widely watched debates, culminating with the election on Nov. 8.

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The outcome was a wafer-thin victory for Kennedy, who garnered 49.7 percent of the vote and 303 electoral votes, versus 49.5 percent and 219 votes for Nixon. Of the 68 million votes cast, only 119,000 swung the election for Kennedy, who had taken Illinois and Minnesota by the slimmest of margins.


But shortly after Nixon’s concession to Kennedy, which he offered in a gracious telegram to his opponent early on the morning of Nov. 9, reports of voting fraud in Illinois and Texas benefiting the Democratic ticket began to surface. In Chicago, in one instance, 121 votes were counted after only 43 people voted, and 6,138 ballots were cast in a Texas county with just 4,895 registered voters.

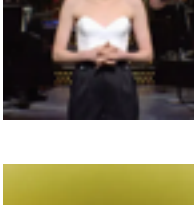
The Republican establishment challenged the results in the news media and in state-level demands for a recount. President Dwight D. Eisenhower even offered to help Nixon raise money to cover what could easily have been a monthslong fight. Over the following weeks the Republicans relentlessly pursued charges of voting irregularity in Illinois and 10 other states, betting that if they won there, they could force a nationwide recount.

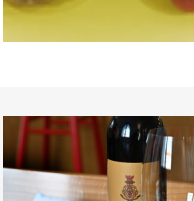
But in contrast to Mr. Trump’s rhetoric today, they tended to cast their efforts in patriotic terms; Eisenhower insisted that he merely wanted to show that the federal government “did not shirk its duty” when it came to questions about the electoral process. Unlike Mr. Trump, they started from a position of trust in the system, focusing their charges of specific malfeasance, rather than declaiming the election itself as “rigged.”


Nevertheless, Nixon, while agonized by his defeat and its dubious circumstances, opted not to join in.

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At least publicly, he played the statesman; he subordinated his own ambitions for the sake of governmental continuity, ensuring that the country was not thrown off balance at a time when the United States was enmeshed in a Cold War with the Soviet Union. “I could think of no worse example for nations abroad,” he said, “than that of the United States wrangling over the results of our presidential elections, and even suggesting that the presidency itself could be stolen by thievery at the ballot box.” (And, of course, he hoped to have a long political career ahead of him; being seen as a sore loser wouldn’t further it.)

Whether Nixon privately encouraged the recount efforts is almost beside the point; unlike Mr. Trump, he understood that unless rock-solid evidence existed to the contrary, the country needed to have faith in the electoral process and the peaceful transition of power, and it needed to hear from the losing candidate that he did, too. (Some argue, however, that Nixon’s experience in 1960 drove his paranoid turn as president, leading directly to Watergate.)

The good of the country, Nixon averred, was more important than the fate of any one man. When Kennedy took office on a bitterly cold January day two and a half months after the election, he sounded a similar theme: “Ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country.”

In a bizarre twist, Nixon was an early supporter of Donald J. Trump. After hearing rave reviews about the brash developer from Nixon’s wife, Pat, who had seen him on “The Phil Donahue Show” in December 1987, he wrote Mr. Trump an unsolicited letter. “I did not see the program,” he wrote, “but Mrs. Nixon said you were great.” He added, “As you can imagine, she is an expert on politics, and she predicts that whenever you decide to run for office you will be a winner!” One wonders what Nixon, a political sage, would think of Mr. Trump the “winner” today.

But there’s little doubt that if Mr. Trump winds up the loser on Nov. 8, Nixon, despite outsize flaws in his own character, would advocate putting country above self. Doing anything less would take some of the greatness out of America.

Mark K. Updegrove, a historian, is the author of “Indomitable Will: LBJ in the Presidency.”

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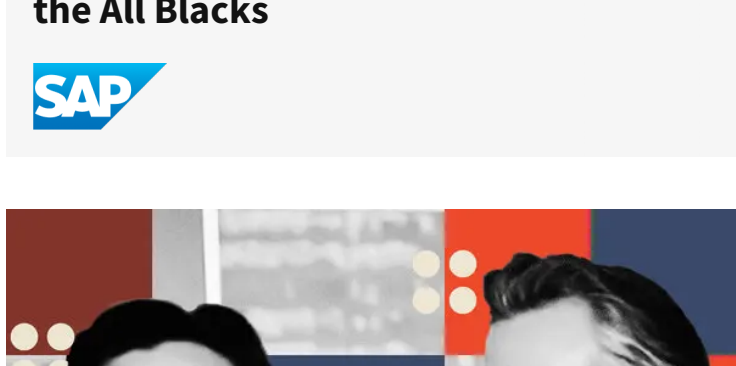


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