Dirty Tricks Of Richard Milhous Nixon

In today's world, the name Richard Milhous Nixon is often synonymous with scandal and corruption. His opening of relations with China and lessening of Cold War tensions have been all but lost to history, at least amongst the American public. Many remember or think of Watergate as the main defining feature of Nixon, and that his political career was not much longer nor much deeper than the two years between the break-in at the Democratic National Committee Headquarters in Washington, DC and his resignation in August of 1974. Yet his political career in fact spanned a much larger time, beginning with his first run for the United States House of Representatives, in 1946, and ending, at least in any organized capacity, in 1974. Many believe, however, that Watergate and the ensuing scandal represents all of Nixon's attempts at winning through dirty methods – it was not. In fact, the use of dirty tricks was to Richard Nixon a long-standing strategy, lasting throughout his political career, of political success.

Arguably, Nixon's desire to win by any means necessary began in his childhood. He was born into a thoroughly Quaker family, and his upbringing was not easy – his family was often pressed for money and young Richard was treated as secondary to his older brother Harold, who died young from tuberculosis. After Harold's death, historian Evan Thomas chronicles, Nixon's mother said that, "'…it seemed that Richard was trying to be three songs in one, striving even harder than before to make up to me and his father for our loss,'" since, Thomas continues, "Richard had taken second place to his doomed brother." This sense of never quite measuring up seemed to drive Richard Nixon throughout his life, and a sense of needing to do more to be appreciated by his parents was likely a basis for Nixon's later sentiment that he "had to win."

After Nixon left the military, he was asked by the Republicans in California to run against the incumbent House Democrat, Jerry Voorhis, for his seat in the US House of Representatives. Nixon accepted, and thus began his long and relatively successful political career. During this election, Nixon also met Murray Chotiner, a young and talented lawyer whose "philosophy," according to THE ARROGANCE OF POWER, "was summed up by one who knew him as 'Hit 'em, hit 'em, and hit 'em again.'" * Chotiner would become the main fixer for the Nixon campaigns from then on, helping Nixon to systematically smear, humiliate, and destroy his opponents.

The first campaign in which Nixon and Chotiner worked together was that 1946 run against Voorhis. Voorhis was an older Christian man who had socialist leanings at times but was certainly not a Communist. * Yet Nixon and Chotiner began a smear campaign against Voorhis, charging him with being a hated Communist sympathizer who had no business as a politician. Further tactics were used to corral voters to Nixon's cause: THE ARROGANCE OF POWER writes that "businessmen were warned by banks that if they should put their names to press releases supporting Voorhis, their credit lines would be cut off," and, late in the cycle, a series of anonymous telephone calls went out to "potential voters. 'Did you know,' a mystery caller would ask, 'that Voorhis is a Communist?'" Nixon also, during this same election, paid for front-page coverage, for "planted news stories and pictures." Voorhis was unable to respond in kind, and ultimately lost the election badly, quitting politics afterward.

It was surely a shock for Voorhis when he lost the election to a young, never-before-seen man from Whittier, California. Voorhis had been in the office for some time before, and, although resentment against his policy was stewing, he had a strong base. Although it is impossible to predict what would have happened had Nixon not began his series of barely legal political tricks to “outfox,” in his words, his opponent, it can certainly be said that his victory would have been significantly less clear. Yet to even speculate on that would be to neglect another important facet of Nixon’s dirty politics.

Mickey Cohen was a high-profile gangster in the Los Angeles area with strong ties to the Italian Mafia and Al Capone.1 In 1946, under the urging of Murray Chotiner, Cohen made large and relatively public donations of sizable sums to the Nixon campaign – money that likely went into financing more elaborate plots to discredit Voorhis. Likewise, during Nixon’s 1950 Senate election campaign, Cohen raised around $660,000 for Nixon’s campaign.

Thus, Richard Nixon won his first-ever election through a combination of smears and dirty political tricks that bordered on the illegal. Murray Chotiner, who had proven himself valuable to Nixon in this campaign, would be there to stay, only leaving in 1974 upon his death in an automobile accident.* Nixon’s experiences in this election had made him more determined than ever to win every seat he had an opportunity to win – so in 1950, Nixon ran against Helen Gahagan Douglas, a Democratic politician and actress who ultimately would serve in the 79th, 80th, and 81st Congresses, for a California Senatorial seat.2 During this campaign, and its associated series of smears, he was to dub her “The Pink Lady” and she was to dub him “Tricky Dick,” a name that stuck with him throughout the remainder of his political career. * MORE ON THIS CAMPAIGN WHEN I GET BOOK

Importantly, in 1952, Nixon, the young, confident Senator from California, was chosen by Dwight D. Eisenhower as his running mate for the Presidential election of that year. (BEING NIXON) The elation that Nixon felt by being chosen quickly gave way to dismay when he learned that the “New York Post had published a story under the headline ‘Secret Nixon Fund!’” (Evan Thomas.) Perhaps ironically, a slush fund had nearly derailed Nixon’s political career before years before a similar fund in the White House had led journalists to the origins of the Watergate break-in in 1972. As a response to this story, Nixon went onto television and gave the now-famous Checkers speech, persuasively reminding the country that he was just another American like them with a “little cocker spaniel dog” named Checkers. (CHECKERS SPEECH CONTENT) This speech renewed confidence in Nixon amongst the public and gave him a positive image in America – an image of a poor, pulled-up-by-the-bootstraps sort of man who was in politics to represent the “silent majority” and the “little man.” Although this does not qualify as an illegal or quasi-illegal tactic to get himself elected, since the slush fund itself did not exist to maintain Nixon’s lifestyle but rather to defray campaign expenses, the Checkers speech in 1952 certainly did renew the nation’s confidence in Nixon and allowed him to become vice-president under Eisenhower, instead of having to resign from the ticket.

The next election in which Nixon participated as the primary candidate for one of the major political parties was the Presidential election of 1960, where Nixon ran against John F. Kennedy. This election was important because it was the first one in Nixon’s political career that far in which he had lost, and he lost by a very tight margin – so tight, in fact, that some believe that bosses loyal to Kennedy had swung the election in his favor. This led to a deep-seated hatred of the Kennedys, in spite of the fact that while they were friendly with each other when both Senators, because Nixon forever believed that Kennedy had stolen the election.

In 1962, soon after the loss to Kennedy, Nixon ran for the governorship of California against the incumbent, Pat Brown. Again, Nixon's campaign produced endless propaganda accusing Brown of being "soft on Communism."3 Nixon's campaign also began sending out a series of mailings that described a "'left-wing takeover of California's political leadership' and claimed falsely that nine out of ten registered Democrats rejected the [California Democratic Council] and were pouring in funds to fight it," writes historian Anthony Summers (THE ARROGANCE OF POWER). This scam was in fact given the green light by Nixon himself.

All of the aforementioned actions would constitute as dirty tricks in that they were quasi-illegal methods used by the Nixon campaign to try to ensure political success. Yet in 1968, Nixon won the presidential election over Hubert Humphrey after a tightly contested campaign. This victory not only represented a major victory for Nixon but also the climax of one of the most remarkable comeback stories in the history of politics.

After Nixon lost the 1962 campaign to Brown, he responded with his famous "Last Press Conference" speech in which he declared, "You won't have Nixon to kick around anymore, because, gentlemen, this is my last press conference." (pg. 136, BN) This, for many, represented the end of Nixon's possibilities as a politician – Evan Thomas, in his book Being Nixon, records that Time magazine wrote soon after: "'Barring a miracle, Richard Nixon can never hope to be elected to any political office again.'"