

## Module 10: How Will Historians Treat Richard Nixon?

### Introduction

In public opinion polls conducted to establish a ranking of United States presidents, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, and Franklin Roosevelt regularly appear in the top four spots. Richard M. Nixon, the nation's thirty-seventh president (in office from 1968 to 1974), consistently ranks much lower. A 2002 survey conducted by the Siena Research Institute at Siena College placed him in the twenty-sixth spot out of the forty-three possible, while a recent Federalist Society survey of presidents published in the *Wall Street Journal* ranked him thirty-third, in the same group with Ulysses S. Grant, John Tyler, and Millard Fillmore, and termed his presidency "below average."

Nixon's role in the Watergate scandal accounts in part for his low ranking. The scandal began as a break-in at the Democratic National Committee headquarters in 1972, was followed by to a cover-up of immense proportions by the president and his closest advisors, and resulted two years later in the only presidential resignation in the nation's history. By resigning, Nixon avoided the impeachment process that Presidents Andrew Johnson and Bill Clinton faced, but he left the White House on August 9, 1974, as one of the most maligned figures ever to occupy the office of president. When Nixon spoke to Americans in 1973 about his role in the Watergate affair, he claimed, "I am not a crook." Investigations by news media, Congress, and a special prosecutor found his denial without merit, and the Nixon administration has become synonymous with the egregious misuse of presidential power. Robert Dole, long-time Senator from Kansas and the 1996 Republican presidential nominee, referred to Gerald Ford (who pardoned Nixon), Jimmy Carter (who promised in 1976 never to lie to the American public), and Richard Nixon as "see no evil, speak no evil, and evil." In the immensely popular film *Star Wars*, released in 1977, director George Lucas even used Richard Nixon as the model for the film's Evil Emperor.

Yet recent public opinion surveys have not identified Richard Nixon as the nation's worst president. When asked to rank presidents by "integrity," however, Nixon falls to the very bottom of the list. At his death in 1994, obituaries praised the accomplishments of his presidency in the areas of domestic and foreign policy. How, then, given such wide-ranging opinion, should we evaluate the thirty-seventh president of the United States? Does Watergate overshadow or define Nixon's six years in office, or did the Nixon presidency have another side, one that

now forces a more nuanced analysis? How can we reconcile the many facets of the Nixon administration, and what criteria should form the basis of our analysis? In this module, you will read and listen to a selection of speeches Nixon made during his years at the White House. Your task is to determine what he viewed as the goals and accomplishments of his presidency and to consider whether Richard Nixon did more good, or more harm.