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Nicholas Evan Sarantakes, an associate professor at the US Naval War College, presents a new side to Richard Nixon’s presidency: the sports fanatic who deftly deployed sports to reach ordinary voters. Watergate and Vietnam so define Nixon that historians often miss his political acumen and genuine popularity, but this thoroughly researched and concise study corrects this tendency. Although the argument could have been pushed further in some places, *Fan in Chief* is a valuable read for historians of sports and Nixon himself.

Sarantakes proceeds chronologically through Nixon’s presidency, showing how he used sports to humanize himself and counter his image as a cold and awkward politician. Throwing out the first pitch of the baseball season, handing out plaques to college football champions, and chumming it up with NFL coaches and players allowed Nixon to absorb the cool of the jocks, demonstrate his extensive knowledge of sports, gain positive press coverage, and relate to the interests of the sports-crazed American people.

Sarantakes uses sources like H. R. Haldeman’s diary and the infamous Nixon tapes to show that Nixon used sports in a calculating political manner. Haldeman noted that Nixon publicized his talent in bowling because this permitted “contact with that segment of the population that we consider to be part of the President’s constituency” (p. 127). However, these sources also demonstrate that Nixon really was a football and baseball obsessive who often postponed important meetings to catch televised games. Sarantakes uses an impressive variety of firsthand testimonials from fans and athletes as well as local and regional newspaper reports to show that ordinary people generally viewed his sports appearances positively.

Sarantakes also shows how Nixon effectively moralized sports in an era when millions of Americans believed the country’s moral standards were slipping. For instance, Nixon praised legendary football coach Vince Lombardi in conservative terms at his memorial service: “Vince Lombardi believed in fundamentals. On the football field this meant blocking and tackling.... Off the field it meant his church, his home, his friends, his family” (p. 76). Nixon often lauded football as a way to instill resilience, selflessness, and toughness in today’s youth, a message that would not be lost on
conservative audiences resentful of the era’s youthful rebellions. Sarantakes helps historians see that millions of Americans loved Nixon for his appeals to core values and traditions and that sports were possibly the most important way he connected with his base.

Sarantakes skillfully incorporates aspects of the broader historical context into the story of Nixon and sports, including Vietnam, electoral politics, and Watergate. However, historians of sport and race might wonder at certain omissions. Nixon’s presidency coincided with what sociologist and activist Harry Edwards called the “Revolt of the Black Athlete,” in which athletes like Muhammed Ali, Tommy Smith, and Jean Carlos increasingly used sports to protest the oppression of African Americans.

Given that Nixon's “Silent Majority” political strategy was based in part on appealing to white Americans’ resentment of civil rights gains and black political activism, it seems surprising that Nixon would not try to use incidents like Ali’s resistance to the draft for political gain. Examining the increasing importance of racial activism in sports in the ‘60s and ‘70s could have opened a fascinating new angle onto this book’s main themes. Sarantakes hints in the conclusion that Nixon’s successful use of sports to defend traditional values shows that historians’ conceptions of the 1960s as a revolutionary period may be overblown, but he does not flesh out this claim.

Lastly, the broader historical relevance of this study could have been enhanced by examining Nixon within the flow of other presidents’ use of sports for politics. Teddy Roosevelt, for instance, viewed manly sports like boxing and football as ways to discipline young elite men for political and military leadership. Should Nixon be understood in that vein? Did the rise of mass electronic communications or the advent of the Cold War fundamentally change the relationship of sport and political leadership? Was his use of sports for politics more a continuity or a turning point compared to his predecessors and successors?

This book could cast new light on these broader questions, but the author (pardon the pun) does not take these shots. Thus, while readers, especially sports fans, may enjoy the page-by-page narration of this book, they may find themselves wondering how it fits into larger historical themes.


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