

Nixon: The Early Years

Synopsis

Richard Milhous Nixon became the 37th president of the United States in 1969, culminating a long and varied career in both politics and the private sector. Nixon: The Early Years chronicles his life from his birth in 1913 to his inauguration as Vice President of the United States in 1953.

The second of five sons, Nixon was born in Yorba Linda, California to Quaker parents of modest means. After the family moved to nearby Whittier in 1922, Nixon worked in various jobs while attending school. He was an excellent student and earned a scholarship to Harvard, but was unable to attend due to his family's financial difficulties. He attended Whittier College instead, followed by Duke University. He then practiced law and later accepted a bureaucratic job in Washington D.C., gaining his first formal political experience.

In 1946 Nixon ran for and was elected to a seat in the United States House of Representatives. During his second term in the House, he gained public recognition from his prosecution of the Alger Hiss case, which enabled him to run for the U.S. Senate in 1950. The program details how Nixon used a "smear campaign" and the threat of Communism to defeat his opponent in the California race. It was at this time that he was given the nickname, "Tricky Dick."

In 1952, Senator Nixon was nominated by the Republican National Convention to be General Dwight D. Eisenhower's running mate. Viewers learn how close Nixon came to losing the opportunity when

his use of a special fund was called into question. A portion of what came to be known as the "Checkers speech" is included, showing Nixon's ability to face adversity with courage and determination. The presentation concludes with the election of Eisenhower and Nixon in November, 1952, and their inauguration on January 23, 1953.

Questions to ask before viewing

1. What does the name Richard M. Nixon bring to mind?
2. What do you know about Nixon's childhood?
3. Describe what you know about Nixon's early career.

Questions to ask after viewing

1. When and where was Richard M. Nixon born? (January 9, 1913 in Yorba Linda, California)
2. How many siblings did he have? (He was the second of five sons.)
3. Describe Nixon's parents, Frank and Hannah. (Frank and Hannah were both very religious, but Frank was a stern disciplinarian with a quick temper. Hannah was from a Quaker family and took the role of peace maker.)
4. What sort of student was Nixon as a youth? (He excelled in school and won a scholarship to Harvard but couldn't attend because of the family's financial difficulties. He went to Whittier College instead, where he graduated with honors in 1934.)
5. What did Nixon do after Whittier College? (He attended Duke University on a scholarship and studied law. He graduated in 1937.)

6. What was Nixon's first career? (He practiced law for the firm Wingert and Bewley and in 1939 was made a junior partner.)
7. What were some of the ways Nixon tried to build contacts to further his career during the 1930s? (He was president of the Whittier College and Duke University Alumni Associations of California, he joined the 20-30 club for young businessmen, and joined a small theater group in Whittier.)
8. How did Nixon meet his wife? Describe her. (He met Thelma Catherine Ryan, called Pat, at the theater group. She had lost both parents in her teens and had put herself through college. She was working as a teacher and had more money at the time than Nixon. She became a Quaker to please Hannah Nixon, and the young couple were married in 1940.)
9. How did Nixon first get to Washington DC? (In 1941, he was recommended for and accepted a bureaucratic job in the Office of Price Administration, which protected the consumer from wartime price gouging.)
10. What major decision did Nixon make in June, 1942? (He decided to enlist in the Navy.)
11. Why was this decision contrary to his upbringing? (As a Quaker, he was raised to be a pacifist against war and therefore against participating in a war. But Nixon did not consider himself a pacifist and had no moral conflict with going to war.)
12. What did Nixon do with his free time while he was in the service? (He taught business classes and played poker.)
13. How did Nixon get into politics? (After the war, he was contacted by a Whittier banker and political leader about running for Congress.)

14. What campaign tactics did Nixon use against Voorhis for a seat in the House of Representatives? (He memorized Voorhis's voting record, enhanced his own military service, got an endorsement from the Los Angeles Times and insinuated that Voorhis was sympathetic to Communism.)
15. As a member of the House Un-American Activities Committee, what did Nixon do? (He tenaciously pursued the case against Alger Hiss, accused of being a Communist, and was responsible for Hiss's conviction.)
16. How did Hiss's conviction help Nixon's career? (As a result of the conviction, the Republican Party nominated Nixon for a seat in the United States Senate in 1950.)
17. How did Nixon get the name, "Tricky Dick"? (His Senate opponent, Helen Gahagan Douglas, gave him the name to describe Nixon's smear campaign tactics.)
18. Why was Nixon chosen to be Eisenhower's running mate in the 1952 presidential elections? (General Eisenhower was very popular due to his military leadership in WW II, but he wasn't really a politician. Nixon was chosen for his youth, political experience, anti-Communist platform, and for being from the west, all of which helped balance the Republican ticket.)
19. How did Pat Nixon feel about the presidential campaign? (She was not pleased, as now the couple had two young daughters and Nixon already spent very little time with his family.)
20. What almost cost Nixon his nomination and how was the issue resolved? (The press questioned a "secret fund" set up for Nixon by California businessmen. Nixon won back public confidence with his televised "Checkers speech.")

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Discussion Guide

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Objectives

- To describe Nixon's childhood and education in California
- To describe Nixon's work as a lawyer and his military service during World War II
- To relate Nixon's questionable tactics during his 1946 campaign for U.S. Representative, and his 1950 bid for U.S. Senator
- To discuss Nixon's efforts on the House Un-American Activities Committee in the case against Alger Hiss
- To describe Nixon's bid for election as vice president as General Dwight D. Eisenhower's running mate in 1952



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