

# The Nixon Sports Campaign, 1968-1973

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Kennedy had charm and wit; Johnson, crude, but real conviviality. Nixon had sports. Everything he did was contrived, rationalized for maximum advantage, joyless and rigid. To others he communicated genuine spontaneity and concern only through sports. The games were more important personally and politically to Nixon than to his predecessors, both of whom had exploited sports.

The Nixon sports campaign was only a part of a larger propaganda campaign based upon television advertising. Even as he became more isolated, his image stalked the land pressing the flesh. Nixon became a commercial. The new Nixon was neither a loser nor remote and secretive. He was one of the boys, as the endless procession of champion athletes who tramped to the White House revealed. The media expertise upon which he depended made Nixon's exploitation of sports by far the most sophisticated the country had ever seen.

The Nixon sports campaign operated upon a large and well-prepared stage. Sports was more popular than ever before. Both the television networks, sensitive to Administration attacks upon their "radlib" news coverage, and the sports corporations, mindful of their dubious legal standing under the Sherman Anti-Trust Act, cooperated with the Administration in the pro-war propaganda campaign.

Nixon depoliticized his policies by describing them in sports jargon. The sports ethic - the struggle for Number One dramatically played each Saturday - provided a reason for continuing the struggle. The coach, sympathetic head of a conservative athletic establishment, offered a unique conduit through which to reach the Silent Majority. The football team, an authoritarian hierarchy engaged in violent struggle and requiring quick and secretive decisions, was the societal model the Administration gave the country for emulation.

To win the war, Nixon had to deflate the anti-war movement and overcome the military stalemate. The endlessness of the war wore thin the earlier justifications. The POWs provided a Cause for the war's continuation. With missing plane formations, prayers, fireworks, military units and moments of silence, football showcased the cause. In the middle class minds to which the sports campaign appealed, Nixon diminished the size and discredited the motives of the campus-led anti-war movement. Nixon appeared in the nation's stadiums each Saturday amid a youthful Silent Majority. If one turned from the least to the most watched program on television, the conclusion was obvious: the anti-war movement was the myth of the radical press.