

# Political Football

*Nixon meets the Longhorns*  
by Nick Sarantakes

Perhaps the single best-known moment in the history of football at The University of Texas came on December 6, 1969. The undefeated, No. 1 Longhorns had just beaten the previously undefeated, No. 2 Arkansas Razorbacks in Fayetteville. After the game, President Richard Nixon walked into the Longhorn dressing room and presented a plaque to Coach Darrell Royal, announcing that Texas had won the college football national championship. For the team, that moment in the dressing room was its reward for enduring an intense, difficult week, and achieving victory over a talented foe. For Nixon, his appearance was part of a subtle and largely successful effort to win political support in the South, using the respect and prestige automatically accorded to the occupant of his office.

In the 1960s, the Longhorns and the Razorbacks were two of the most dominant powers in college football. In 1963, Texas had an undefeated season and won the national championship after defeating Navy in the Cotton Bowl. A year later Arkansas also went undefeated and won its own national championship. The contests between these two schools had national implications, even in the years when neither won the title. In 1962, 1964, and 1965 the Texas-Arkansas game cost one of the two schools the national championship, giving the title to another program.

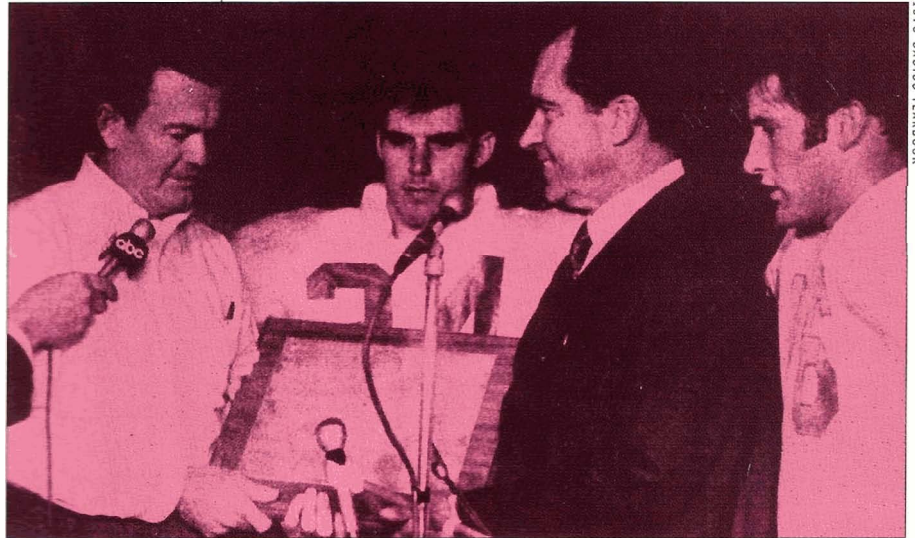
The 1969 Texas-Arkansas game took on the tone of a battle for the ages the week before the game because of the Ohio State-Michigan game a week before. No. 1 Ohio State, the defending national champion, lost to Michigan, which propelled Texas and Arkansas from second and third in both wire service polls to first and second. Until then, the Longhorn-Razorback clash had been an important regional game between two highly ranked teams that would determine the conference championship and the berth in the Cotton Bowl, nothing more. Now the contest had suddenly become the national title game of the college football centennial season. Everyone in Austin — students, alumni, and fans — eagerly anticipated the game.

Austin mayor Travis LaRue renamed Congress Avenue "Longhorn Avenue" and declared Saturday, December 6 — the day of the game — "Texas Longhorn Day in Austin and Fayetteville." Reporters from the *Austin American* were not able to get any comment from Fayetteville city officials.

Not to be outdone, Gov. Preston Smith held a press conference and presented Royal with a commission, naming the coach a "field general" for the "Battle of Fayetteville." A crowd of 25,000 to 30,000 filled the east side of Memorial Stadium for a pep rally. Eight Austin-area high school bands played while people gathered and waited for the team to arrive. A convoy of convertibles brought the team into the stadium. The sight of the balloon-filled air and the sign-waving crowd stunned many of the players. The enthusiasm continued

throughout the week as every major newspaper in the state ran stories about "The Game" on the front page of their sports sections. The intensity of the hype began to worry the editorial board of the *Austin American*. The paper printed an editorial titled "Keeping 'The Game' in Perspective," urging fans to remember that it was an amateur athletic event and not a professional football game. On December 2, the White House added to the attention surrounding the game, when it announced that the president would attend.

Nixon's decision to see the contest in person was a matter of simple politics. On October 6, Harry Dent, the White House liaison to Southern members of Congress, read an article in *The New York Times* titled "In the South, Football is a Religio-Social Pastime." The



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article gave Dent an idea that he put in a memo to White House chief of staff H.R. "Bob" Haldeman: "If at any time during the remainder of this term the president wants to see and be seen by a tremendous crowd of enthusiastic Southerners, I suggest we consider sending him to one of the big football rivalry games." He suggested that the White House be on the lookout for a game between two interstate rivals. "This would be a good way to get him into a key Southern state and get to see many good people from two states, without doing anything political."

Nixon loved the idea. Football was his sport, and the South was a key region of political support. If not for the electoral college votes from the states of the old Confederacy, Nixon would have lost the 1968 presidential election. The dependability of that support was another matter though. Southerners voted for him not out of conviction, but because they considered him the best of the available candidates. He could not take the region for granted, and his trip to Fayetteville was an effort to show he was paying attention to his political base.

The president also decided he would award a plaque to the winner. "This presentation will be especially significant in that it will commemorate the One Hundredth Anniversary of College Football as well as recognize the nation's Number One Football Team," Nixon explained. The president was essentially awarding the title to the winner of the game, since custom in college football held that the team ranked first in the polls at the season's end receives the national championship. This was an impressive way of garnering even more attention from the visit.

Nixon's trip to Arkansas was an unqualified success. After two

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quarters of play in which the Razorbacks shut down the Longhorn offense and led 7-0, he was the center of attention during half-time. He appeared on television with ABC sportscaster Chris Schenkel. "I must say I have never seen a football game where there is more excitement in the air than there is today," he said at the start of the interview. When Schenkel asked him what he expected in the second half, Nixon said, "I think that Texas has enormous power that is really not unleashed yet, and that in the second half they are likely to be much better offensively." Nixon also explained how the Longhorns would score, "I think they are going to have to throw more. They have an excellent passer and they will have to throw to open up the Arkansas defense. I think under those circumstances they are likely to score once or twice." Nixon was extremely careful in his interview to adopt a neutral stance.

Every sentence praising one school was followed by one praising the other. Nevertheless, a reporter from the *Washington Post* said he was leaning toward Texas. Because of the president's interview, the bands from both schools were featured only briefly on television. The Longhorn Band, however, honored the presence of the president, forming the word "NIXON" on the field and playing "Hail to the Chief."

During the second half, the game, indeed, became one for the ages. Arkansas scored a second touchdown, taking a 14-0 lead. But Texas stormed back in the fourth quarter. Texas quarterback James Street broke a tackle at the line of scrimmage, raced down the sideline, and outran an Arkansas defender the last 15 yards into the end zone. Reporters covering the game sensed a shift in the momentum. On the next play, Street ran again for a two-point conversion. Texas stopped an Arkansas drive on the 7-yard line with an interception, and then put together its own winning drive, which included a Street pass from his own 26-yard line down to the Arkansas 13-yard line on fourth down. A Texas score followed a few plays later, and the Longhorns won the game 15-14.

"The Game," or the "Big Shootout" as it would later be remembered, had lived up to its billing. "This was one of the great games

of all time," Nixon proclaimed afterwards. The sports editor of the *Austin American* explained why: "The ebb and flow of play was such that it emotionally wrung out the followers of both sides."

Nixon dominated post-game events just as he had the half-time show. After Texas players and coaches arrived in their locker room, the Secret Service closed it off. Thinking that the agent guarding the door was a University of Arkansas official, Texas assistant coaches Fred Akers and Emory Bellard pushed their way inside. "It was one of the neater runs of the afternoon," a sports columnist commented. When Nixon arrived, the locker room exploded in applause. The president had a large grin on his face, and his trademark awkwardness was gone. He was at ease and genuinely happy. After he made his way to the podium with Royal, he gave his award to the coach. "In presenting this plaque, I want to say first that the AP and the UPI

will name Texas No. 1, as we know, after this game." He also believed Texas deserved this ranking, and explained why, "Having seen this game, what convinced me that Texas deserves that is the fact that you won a tough one. For a team to be behind 14 to 0 and then not to lose its cool and to go on to win, that proves that you deserve to be No. 1, and that is what you are."

Coach Royal accepted the plaque, and expressed what were in all likelihood the sentiments of every member of his coaching staff and team. "Mr. President, it is a great thrill for us to win the football game, but the big thrill — I know I speak for all our squad — is for the president of the United States to take time to endorse college football and to honor us with your presence in our locker room."

The trip went well for Nixon, as Haldeman made clear in his diary that day: "He did a great job and TV covered it thoroughly: the arrival by helicopter; the half-time interview in the press box; the plaque presentation to Texas (15-14); the crowd scene outside the locker room; the consolation visit to the Arkansas locker room. Great stuff."

The city of Austin went wild with excitement after the win. The Tower was orange. The area around campus became jammed with honking cars. Cheering crowds danced

in the streets. People everywhere were flashing "No. 1" and "Hook 'em Horns" signs. Roughly 7,000 people awaited the team at the airport, and when the team plane landed, the mob surged forward and stopped the plane before it reached the gate. Players and coaches had to wade through the crowd to reach the team buses.

There was a sad note in the aftermath of the game. Longhorn Freddy Steinmark, who had started at safety all season, had a bruised leg that would not heal. He had hidden the injury from the coaches all season afraid that he might be benched. After the game, he found the pain too much to bear and reported to the team trainer. The team doctor, on learning the details feared a cancerous tumor and ordered X-rays, which confirmed his suspicions. Steinmark and the team doctor flew to Houston the next day to have the athlete admitted to the M.D. Anderson Hospital for more testing. Royal broke off a visit to New York when he heard the news, and was with Steinmark when doctors told him his leg would have to be amputated at the hip. The University of Texas established a trust for Steinmark and paid for all his medical bills.

Nixon learned of Steinmark's fate from a CBS report. As Nixon biographer Stephen Ambrose notes, the president, despite his image as a unprincipled politician, was capable of generous acts of kindness. Royal contacted the White House and asked if Nixon would call Steinmark while he was in the hospital. The president agreed and made the call the day after the surgery, but failed to reach Steinmark, talking instead with the player's father. The next day he called again, and this time talked with Steinmark. "It takes a special kind of man to be a great football player and it takes a special courage to face the difficult test of a serious operation," the president later wrote to him. "You were always a man to be reckoned with on the playing field and we know that the same hearty spirit will sustain and encourage you during this time you must spend in the hospital." He appeared to make rapid recovery and was on the sidelines for the Cotton Bowl, which his teammates and coaches dedicated to him. Unfortunately for Steinmark, the cancer was persistent and took his life in June 1971.

There have been big games since then, and schools with longer, more dominant runs at the top, but none since have ever won a trophy displaying the presidential seal. ▼

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