American Politics:

Realistic Idealism or Political Idealism?

Discuss the principles of realistic idealism v. political idealism. In your discussion, explain the difference between foreign and domestic policies v. foreign and domestic politics. Your essay should briefly discuss the events that are associated with Watergate affair and concerns of our Founding Fathers about the human condition and political parties.

1. **Concept number one**: Discuss the concerns of our Founding Fathers about political parties and the nature of man.

   A. Under the American political system there is a constant testing of strength among the: (1) three branches of government and between the (2) two major parties.

   B. In forming the Constitution, the Founding Fathers tried to create a government that would DISCOURAGE the formation of NATIONAL PARTIES.

   1. The Founding Fathers knew conflict between organized groups would occur as it had occurred during the drafting of the document itself.

   2. These struggles would bring out people’s worst failings: selfishness, ambition, and deceit. In order to gain the advantage, political parties and their leaders might stop at nothing. People’s Loyalties would then be tied to their Party and not to their COUNTRY.

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C. The Founding Fathers were also in agreement on the question of *Human Nature* and on the exercise of political power. It was acknowledged that wealth tends to corrupt the mind, and the rich as well as the poor, would use power to their own advantage if given the opportunity.

1. Because Human Nature was universally fallible only built-in *institutional safeguards* could be relied on.

2. James Madison’s quote:

D. The **final question** is, does a republican form of government depend on the virtue or character of its leaders or on the formal political institutions (**checks and balances**) that control the people and their leaders?

II. **Concept number two**: Discuss and explain the difference between *Realistic Idealism and Political Idealism*. Use Richard Nixon and his political philosophy to demonstrate this material.

A. There are a number of characteristics about Richard Nixon that must be taken into account in order to understand him and his politics. They are:

1. His deep **personal pride** and his tremendously **competitive nature**.

2. His belief in **blind loyalty**, to family, country and the institution of the presidency.

3. His **struggle between** the politics of **realistic idealism** (how to get things done--politics) and **political idealism** (trying to do the right thing for the country-higher goal).
B. Because of his competitive nature, Nixon did not know the meaning of the word quit. Thus, when he came upon a problem, political or otherwise, he would always find a way to win or achieve his goals. "Show me a good loser, and I'll show you a loser."

C. Nixon appears to be a man of strong principles with clearly defined political interest. In carry out his political interest or higher goals for the country and the world as he saw them, he was often caught between the principles of realistic idealism and political idealism.

Describes political ACTIONS---Whatever it takes
The higher goals/Morally right

1. Realistic idealism is a form of pragmatism. The use of Realistic Actions to carry out the HIGHER GOAL. Realistic idealism reflects the reality and morality of politics. Realistic idealism = POLITICAL MORALITY for both domestic and foreign politics—Abraham Lincoln / Richard Nixon.
   a. Lincoln quote:

   b. Nixon quote:

Describes political POLICY goals and how actions will be taken.
Describes the desire to carry out higher goal.

2. Political Idealism is the use of personal morality in developing both domestic and foreign policy---Jimmy
Carter. The use of personal values and morality as a guide to the establishment of domestic and foreign policy and politics – both his goals and actions are idealistic.

a. Jimmy Carter often said: “...give me the best solution to the problem and I’ll worry about the politics.” Jimmy carter’s image of the presidency was idealistic and was based on his belief that an issue and a president’s actions would be evaluated by the public on the merits of the results and its basis for the public and the public good. As Carter demonstrated: in domestic politics, political idealism is mostly INEFFECTIVE.

b. Nixon in Vietnam attempted to achieve an impossible task in trying to gain a democratic and respectable settlement –idealistic policy, but understood that it was an almost impossible task. Thus he saw the need to resort to the practices of realistic idealism.

c. On the other hand Woodrow Wilson’s attempt to create world peace with the League of Nations after WW I was not very practical or realistic in his politics or political action. As we will see, he was thus ineffective and failed in creating the type of peace he wanted after WW I.

3. The question is: is political morality justified in carryout the goals of personal morality—does the ends justify the means?
D. Nixon’s sense of politics leads him to equate realistic idealism with foreign and domestic politics, and political idealism with foreign and domestic policy. In Conclusion, the fundamental components to Nixon’s personality and political philosophy made his reaction to the events of his presidency very logical and predictable. His actions surrounding the Watergate break-in and cover-up demonstrate WHY the Founding Fathers were opposed to political parties.

III. Concept number three: Discuss the domestic politics surrounding the Watergate break-in and cover-up an example of realistic idealism.

A. Political war between the parties—the 1960 election set the stage for Watergate.

B. Political tools, fraud, bugging, break-ins, and political dirty tricks.

C. The Break-in occurred because of the need to win the 1972 election and the need to know what political tools and dirty tricks were the Democrats going to use.

E. Nixon’s resignation proved to be the culmination of the Watergate scandal. The entire episode revealed both the weaknesses and strengths of the American political system as discussed by the Founding Fathers.
1. In evaluating Nixon's actions in light of the personal morality and idealism by which politicians are judged, Nixon committed a great moral wrong.
   a. He behaved in the exact manner the Founding fathers anticipated any normal human being would when placed in a position of power.

   b. Nixon is guilty of reflecting the natural and unacceptable side of human nature--the self-seeking facet of the human condition and the reality and art of politics.

   c. The question is, does this make Watergate acceptable? The answer is both yes and no.

   No, the human condition cannot be used to make Watergate and its associated activities politically or morally acceptable simply because others have done worse.

   Yes, Watergate can become acceptable if it is understood as part of a growth process that, because of the human condition, is inevitable. The exposure of the Watergate break-in was necessary as part of the checks and balances process within the historical development of this country, much as one sees adjustments in the prices of stocks in the economic market.
Like the stock, market the unhealthy practices of the Watergate Crisis and the political practice that preceded it, led to a political crash, which provided need adjustments within our political system.

A statement by Thomas Jefferson regarding Shays’ rebellion in 1787 describes the crisis and adjustment process the best.

“God forbid we would ever be twenty years without such a rebellion. The people cannot be all, and always, well informed. The part which is wrong will be discontented in proportion to the importance of the facts they misconceive. If they remain quite under such conceptions it is a lethargy, the forerunner of death to the public liberty. What country before ever existed a century and a half without a rebellion? And what country can preserve its liberties if their rulers are not warned from time to time that their people preserve the spirit of resistance: Let them take arms. The remedy is to set them right as to facts, pardon and pacify them. What signify a few lives in a century or two? The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants. It is it’s natural manure.”
2. If it is possible to avoid future political problems such as Hoover, Kennedy and Watergate type activities, society must understand two things: (1) Watergate type activities are a part of the political morality existing within our system; and (2) our political system needs periodic adjustments in order to lessen the creative tension that exists between the two major political parties.

   a. To look upon Watergate and the surrounding activities as a failing of one man negates the historical lesson society should learn from Watergate and will lay a foundation for it to occur again.

   b. The lesson of Watergate makes one realize even more the greatness of the men who formed our Constitution. They had the intellectual ability, as well as the political wisdom, to recognize human nature for what it is and to provide for the separation of powers and the checks and balances system within the government.

   c. A more idealistic group of men might have viewed human nature in a more pure and simpler form, but they might not have created a document that would last over 200 years, as the Constitution has.