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Research shows Nixon hurt '69 Lions

Before there was Rutgers and the Bowl Championship Series and the hullabaloo over whether the Scarlet Knights should be worthy of national championship consideration if they finish undefeated, there was Penn State in 1969.

The Nittany Lions, under fourth-year coach Joe Paterno (doesn't that sound odd?), were not yet a powerhouse. They were on the verge, but didn't have nearly the clout or tradition as, say, Texas.

Rutgers and its fans might be discouraged to realize that the Nittany Lions went from 5-5 in Paterno's first season to 8-2-1 with finishes of 10th in The Associated Press poll and 11th in the United Press International rankings in his second season, then reeled off 11-0 records in 1968 and 1969 and yet were shut out of a shot at the national title.

In those years, the bowl system was different, the major polls had huge sway and the word "mythical" often preceded the phrase "national championship."

Texas won that national championship, thanks not only to its big, comeback victory against Arkansas but also to some tricky intervention from President Richard Nixon.

That connection might seem farfetched for those like yours truly who were too young to keep up with football and politics or not around yet 37 years ago.

But take it from Nicholas Evan Sarantakes, it's true.

"There's no two ways about it — Penn State got the fuzzy side of the lollipop in 1969," Sarantakes said this week. "I don't think Nixon realized how angry and disappointed Penn State and Joe Paterno were."

Sarantakes isn't a Penn State graduate. He's a Longhorn who did his post-graduate work at Kentucky and Southern California. And although he has some relatives in Vandergrift, he's not a Pennsylvania guy.

A military and diplomatic historian and author, Sarantakes took a keen interest in the '69 Paterno-Nixon feud, one-sided as it was. His extensive research led to a lengthy article earlier this year in *Pennsylvania History*. A shortened version appeared on ESPN.com.

"This was kind of a convergence of what I do, and it was just plain fun," said Sarantakes, an associate professor of joint and international operations at the Fort Gordon, Ga., campus of the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College. "You're usually doing all this serious, totally academic stuff. Now I'm going to look at some football stuff."

In '69, defending national champion Ohio State and Tennessee were undefeated for most of the season. In November, though, the Buckeyes were tripped up by Michigan (there has been no cooling off in that matchup over the years) and the Volunteers fell to Mississippi.

That boosted Texas and Arkansas, both unbeaten, to the top of the polls and set up their Dec. 6 matchup as a potential national championship game — if you discounted Penn State.

Nixon decided to attend the game in Fayetteville, Ark. According to Sarantakes, that was because he had been asked to help commemorate 100 years of college football, and, probably more important, it was a way for him to boost his political image in the south.

Then Nixon decided to award a plaque to the winner, which was seen as essentially crowning a national champion.

Paterno and Pennsylvania governor Raymond Shafer griped. A few Penn State alums and fans picketed the White House, which got some 90,000 angry letters and telegrams.

As a concession, it was decided Nixon would present a second plaque to the Nittany Lions for having the sport's longest unbeaten, untied streak.

The cameras followed Nixon closely that day at Arkansas. He sat at the 35-yard line. He was interviewed at halftime. In the locker room after the Longhorns' 15-14 win, he handed over the booty, saying, "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."

It must have been hard to argue with a decree like that.

Sarantakes writes that when the White House called about picking up the other plaque, Paterno said, "You tell the president to take that trophy and shove it."

And this from a coach who has enough affinity for Republicans that, in 1988, he gave a presidential nominating speech for then-Vice President George H.W. Bush.

We all know that Paterno — who missed last week's victory against Temple after leg surgery and will be in the coaches' box Saturday against Michigan State — can harbor a grudge like gold. In this case, it seems to be justified.

Sarantakes dug up a great nugget from Paterno's speech at the 1973 Penn State commencement.

"I'd like to know," Paterno asked the graduates, "how could the president know so little about Watergate in 1973 and so much about college football in 1969?"

Get better soon, Joe. The football world is a less colorful place with you laid up.