The author begins this volume on election day in 1962 when Richard Nixon, defeated in his bid for the California governorship, retired from political life. But staging one of the greatest political comebacks in American history, on November 6, 1968, Richard Nixon achieved the ultimate triumph and was elected president of the US. With the help of Henry Kissinger, Nixon opened relations with China, established detente with the USSR and withdrew troops from the bloody stalemate in Vietnam - yet in preparing for the 1972 election, he had begun sowing the seeds of his own destruction in the maelstrom the country would soon refer to as Watergate.

My Personal Review:
As usual, Stephen E. Ambrose is flawless in this middle edition of the Nixon trilogy. The book is quite long and detailed to a fault. The detail includes huge quantities of actual quotes, painting a picture of Nixon about as clear as one can get on any man. The picture I got was of a man not well suited for the presidency. Intelligent, clever, creative, bold, knowledgeable on world affairs, yes. But he also had character flaws. Over-sensitive almost to the point of paranoia, Nixon was driven by an obsession to be President more than the desire to be presidential. His statement in the later David Frost interview that, If the President does it, it’s not illegal, is very telling. The ends justified the means. He had the ability to rank goals above consequences, and almost everything he did was for the acquisition or preservation of political power. The best example is Vietnam. He took four years to end a war he knew early on could not be won. His delays were to search for ways to avoid being the first American President to lose a war, and to prevent the staining of American honor. Both of which would have cost Nixon reelection in 1972. Ambrose makes the point that half the names on the Vietnam War Memorial are from the period of Nixons futile attempts to foil Hanoi and fool America. People should never have to die to protect a politicians legacy. I see Nixon and Clinton, representing both political parties, as two good examples of why
character matters when we vote. For some reason, the presidency attracts extreme or narcissistic personalities whose motivations are more for glory than good. After reading Ambroses book, the simple question, Why does this person want to be president? will rank higher in my mind. Another eye-opener in the book was the lesson in political science. Nixon was neither an appealing candidate, nor a rallying ideologue. He scraped his way to the top because he was the consummate partisan politician. Ambrose shows a glimpse of the American political systems underbelly: maneuvering, manipulating, prevaricating, waffling, and backstabbing. He makes it easy to forget that despite the warts, our republican democracy is still the best system in the world. The irony and enigma of Nixon is that he also opened up China, warmed the Cold War with the Soviets, began nuclear disarmament, and other worthy and statesman-like accomplishments. The book, like Nixon himself, will mean different things to different people. --Christopher Bonn Jonnes, author of BIG ICE

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