

To Understand a Scandal: Watergate beyond Nixon

by David Sarias

In the early hours of June 17, 1972, police officers arrested five men suspected of breaking into the offices of the Democratic National Committee headquarters in Washington DC's Watergate office building. This building would lend its name to the subsequent political scandal that led, just over two years later, to Richard Nixon's resignation on August 8, 1974. To date, Nixon is the only president of the United States to have resigned from office. He did so as a direct consequence of his involvement in the attempted cover-up of the links between the arrested men, the White House, and the Committee to Re-Elect the President (officially named CRP, it became aptly known as CREEP) during the 1972 presidential elections. In the process, more than forty members of Nixon's administration, including some of his top advisors and a former US attorney general, were investigated and nineteen of them were indicted.



Richard Nixon on the day of his resignation, August 9, 1974, with his daughter and son-in-law, Edward and Tricia Cox. (National Archives and Records Administration)

The Watergate imbroglio was marked by the tremendously polarizing figure of Nixon himself; the high drama of widely watched congressional hearings; tales of abuses of power allegedly involving various branches of the nation's secret services; reports of colorful language emanating from the oval office; and the much publicized exploits of heroic journalists determined to track down the real story. It mesmerized Americans at the time, and ever since it has remained a fixture in the nation's collective psyche. Even today, four decades after the events, it still symbolizes all that is, and might be, wrong with the workings of the federal government, elected officials and, ultimately, with the political system itself.

Yet, we cannot understand Watergate and its consequences in isolation from the historical context in which they unfolded. These included powerful political and cultural forces such as the movements against the Vietnam War and in favor of civil rights for the nation's minorities; the counterculture; and the expanding "credibility gap" separating high national politics and politicians from the electorate. As Richard Nixon and his supporters often claimed in their own defense, such abuses were anything but oddities in American politics. In a particularly incensed fashion, Nixon's most loyal defenders have sought to exonerate the disgraced ex-president by emphasizing that all the great Democratic-progressive administrations, including those of Franklin D. Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy, and Lyndon B. Johnson, had indulged in similar under-handed tactics to gain and retain office. Nevertheless, by the early 1970s, neither a significant part of the press nor the great majority of the American public were prepared to accept that kind of behavior in public life.

An overview of the events that surrounded the Watergate scandal is followed by an examination of the key elements that help explain why a president endowed with considerable intellectual talent and an ample electoral mandate was politically destroyed by—or, more accurately, self-destructed through—the fallout

from what Nixon's press secretary, Ron Ziegler, labeled a "third-rate burglary." In fact, "break-in" is a more appropriate description, since the objective of the "burglars" was to plant listening devices in the hope of gaining information useful to Nixon's electoral campaign, and nothing was stolen from the DNC offices.

How a "Third-Rate Burglary" Led a President to "Twist Slowly, Slowly, in the Wind"

On June 20, 1972, three days after the arrest of the five men who had illegally broken into the DNC offices, Bob Woodward reported in the pages of the *Washington Post* that the FBI had found the name of E. Howard Hunt in the agendas of Bernard Barker and Eugenio Martinez, two of the alleged burglars. A former CIA operative, Hunt had been hired as a security assistant by the White House on the recommendation of presidential counsel Charles Colson in 1971, and had subsequently moved on to work for CRP. Woodward, we now know, had been tipped off by Mark Felt, the deputy director of the FBI. The Bureau had itself become involved in the investigation of a mere burglary because once the police found wiretapping equipment, the investigation fell under its remit. A few months later, in September, harried by the press and despite the best efforts of the White House, the FBI arrested both Hunt and G. Gordon Liddy, a former FBI agent who had become CRP's general counsel first and its finance committee's counsel later thanks to the support of White House counsel John Dean.[1] Yet, despite the tantalizing reports in the *Post* and the arrests of relatively senior CRP personnel, the rest of the press corps believed the White House's vigorous denials of any involvement in or knowledge of the issue, and failed to pick up the story. While the attention of the Washington press corps and the public at large remained fixed on the unfolding presidential campaign, Richard Nixon and senior White House personnel including Chief-of-Staff Bob Haldeman and domestic policy tsar John Ehrlichman devised a strategy to block the investigation. This began to unfold as early as June 23, a mere three days after the break-in. That day, Haldeman proposed to Nixon to "have [Vernon] Walters [deputy director of the CIA] call Pat Gray [director of the FBI] and just say 'stay the h*ll out of this' on grounds of 'national interest.'"[2] Unbeknownst to most of his staffers, Nixon had installed an audio-activated recording system in the Oval Office that was intended, he subsequently claimed, to prevent journalists and historians from distorting the legacy of his presidency. Two years later, however, the recording of that conversation between Nixon and Haldeman devising a plan to obstruct the FBI investigation saw the light, became known as the "smoking-gun tape," and sealed the fate of the President.

During late 1972 and early 1973 the White House seemed to have succeeded in stalling the FBI investigation. The official story put forth by the President's men, however, began to fall apart on February 28, 1973, when L. Patrick Gray, the then-acting FBI director, admitted he believed that John Dean had "probably" lied to the agents investigating the break-in, and also confessed to having followed Dean's orders to keep the White House informed about the evolution of the investigation. Gray's slip moved John Ehrlichman to pronounce his famous dictum: the White House should leave Gray to "twist slowly, slowly, in the wind." This they did until about a month later, on April 27, when Gray was forced to resign after owning up to having destroyed secret documents removed from Howard Hunt's safe, again under the orders of John Dean and ostensibly on national security grounds. By the time Gray fell into disgrace, James McCord—former CRP security chief and, amazingly, one of the five men already serving prison sentences—broke down and sent a letter to judge John Sirica admitting to having committed perjury during his trial and withdrawing the testimony in which he had blamed the CIA for the break-in. Immediately afterwards, McCord led investigators into the White House, John Dean gave in too and, from April 1973 onwards, began to cooperate with the prosecution in exchange for leniency.

Once the dam of lies cracked, it quickly collapsed under the increasing flow of revelations that would eventually drown the presidency. Haldeman, Ehrlichman, and US Attorney General Richard Kleindienst resigned on the same day (April 30) that Dean was sacked. Shortly thereafter, the White House was forced to appoint Archibald Cox as special prosecutor to investigate the President's own conduct. Even worse from Nixon's perspective, by then the Senate Select Committee on Presidential Campaign Activities (variously known as the Watergate Committee or the Ervin Committee, after its president, Sam Ervin) had begun its nationally televised hearings. By that point, therefore, the whole affair was being investigated by the Senate committee, Special Prosecutor Cox, and Judge John Sirica, not to mention Woodward and Bernstein of the *Washington Post* and an increasing number of journalists from other major national newspapers. The penultimate act of the Watergate drama unfolded—delivered live to the homes of the American public—on July 13, when Nixon's appointments secretary, Alexander Butterfield, let slip that the President had installed the soon-to-be-famous recording system. Instantly both Cox and Ervin demanded the tapes, which Nixon flatly refused to hand over, claiming executive privilege—that is, the right of the president to withhold information from Congress or the tribunals on national security grounds.

The President's refusal, which led to his ordering Cox's dismissal and accepting the indignant resignations of both Elliot Richardson (who had replaced Kleindienst as attorney general) and Richardson's deputy, William Ruckelshaus, in what became known as the "Saturday Night Massacre," did nothing to improve his public standing. Moreover, it served as further evidence of Nixon's tendency to abuse the power of his office. What was still a (certainly growing) suspicion became a certainty when, after the Supreme Court in *United States v. Richard Nixon* ordered the President to hand over the tapes, the smoking-gun conversation became public on August 5, 1974. There is little evidence of Nixon approving of, or even having any prior knowledge of the break-in, which had been authorized by CRP senior staffers John Mitchell, Jeb Stuart Magruder, and Robert Mardian.[3] Nixon, in fact, can be heard in the tapes wondering aloud about who could have approved such a foolish action (although, on the other hand, he knew he was being recorded), and it is abundantly clear he was lied to by his subordinates.

Yet, even if he had little to do with organizing the break-in, the tape abundantly demonstrated how, in the course of the subsequent cover-up, the President's conduct fell within all three articles of impeachment passed by the House Judiciary Committee: obstruction of justice, abuse of power, and contempt of Congress. After a group of senior Republican senators led by Barry Goldwater let him know that they could not guarantee his tenure, Richard Nixon became the first president of the United States to resign from office, on August 8, 1974. The Watergate scandal drew to a close when, to the considerable frustration of many segments of the American public, Nixon's successor, Gerald R. Ford, granted the disgraced ex-president a full pardon, which put an end to all further investigations into his conduct in office. Ford's stated intent for issuing the pardon was to end the agony that Nixon had inflicted upon the nation, and to protect whatever was left of the prestige accorded to highest office in the land. As it was, Ford's decision significantly contributed—as he knew it would—to his losing the 1976 election. Nevertheless, this sacrifice possibly contributed to bringing about much-needed national healing earlier than would otherwise have been possible, and it almost certainly saved the entire political class some considerable embarrassment. Alas, it also fueled the subsequent, and persistent, perception of Watergate as unfinished business. The absence of a Nixon trial has fostered both a sense of injustice and the feeling that not everything (perhaps not even the most important details) is yet known about Watergate.[4]

Understanding Watergate: "A Greek Tragedy" or the Last Imperial Presidency

One of the most consistently repeated and difficult-to-answer questions regarding Watergate is: “Why?” With the benefit of hindsight, we know that Richard Nixon went on to win the 1972 election by the largest margin in postwar history and that the wiretaps that the President’s men had installed at the DNC did not produce any information useful to the campaign. The break-in was such an improbable, apparently absurd act that both journalists and politicians were actually deterred from following Bernstein and Woodward’s investigative lead at the time. After the passage of decades, even professional historians have strived to figure out rational explanations for an apparently bizarre and ultimately self-destructive decision.[5] Whatever the details of the break-in itself, the known facts point to a complex and diffuse explanation for the events that led to Nixon’s downfall.

The one chief cause of the Watergate scandal was doubtlessly Nixon himself. He had felt increasingly resentful since his narrow loss in the 1960 presidential election—which he believed had been stolen through electoral rigging by the likes of Mayor Richard Daley of Chicago—or even since the 1952 election, when he had suffered personal (and ungrounded) accusations of corruption. By 1968 Nixon had grown into a near-paranoid, embattled politician who believed himself at war with the bulk of America’s intelligentsia, including the mainstream media and academia.[6] Throughout his entire first term, as the memoirs left by former White House officials such as speechwriter William Safire and head of the research and writing staff James Keogh show, Nixon’s sense of victimization and instinctive aggressiveness toward his critics permeated the whole administration. This, in turn, created a “siege mentality,” dominated by a collective sense of “fear and suspicion” that propelled his advisors to advocate, justify, and sometimes carry out extreme measures—which, perversely, also fuelled the fear of the administration on the part of the press.[7] Charles Colson’s suggestion that the Brookings Institution, a progressive-leaning think-tank, ought to be “firebombed” still stands out as a particularly atrocious anecdote. Yet the more serious efforts to limit civil liberties and expand the federal government’s surveillance capacities embodied in the infamous Huston Plan were clear signals of a more serious and pervasive malady—one so acute that it alarmed no less than FBI director J. Edgar Hoover, no shrinking violet when it came to treating the civil rights of US citizens with some flexibility. Similarly, Nixon’s obsession with secrecy and disdain for public opinion when it came to foreign policy went far toward explaining the descent into the abyss that led to Watergate.

Thus, as early as 1969 and throughout 1970 Nixon, egged on by the then equally aggressive and paranoid Henry Kissinger, had the FBI wiretap some members of the National Security Council after leaks of the air bombings of Cambodia appeared in the pages of the *New York Times*—which in turn had revealed to the public an operation so secret and illegal that the official flight logs had been tampered with and the pilots themselves were misled into believing they were bombing Vietnam.[8] For many, including a significant number of his foes, Nixon’s story is one of Shakespearean tragedy, one in which a president’s inner demons frustrated the promises held by his undeniable intellectual talents and capacity for hard work *after* he had achieved (twice) his lifetime objective: to lead the nation.[9] Henry Kissinger, not known as a man prone to sentimentality, once famously wondered how great a man Richard Nixon would have been if someone had “shown him some love.”[10]

And yet, Richard Nixon and his staff’s paranoid sense of embattlement was not only the product of overheated imaginations. Discomfiting leaks, after all, certainly existed. Not least that of the “Pentagon Papers,” an examination of US policy in Indo-China collected by the Department of Defense, which acknowledged that four consecutive administrations—from Harry S. Truman to Lyndon Johnson—had consistently lied to and misled the American public about US policy in Vietnam, that was leaked to the

New York Times by former defense analyst Daniel Ellsberg. Although the Nixon administration was not covered in the analysis, the President and his advisors correctly believed that its release would reignite already feverish anti-war sentiment and hamper their own initiatives in Southeast Asia. Nixon's men reacted by sending the same team of operatives who later broke into the Watergate building (called "the plumbers" after their mission to stop leaks) to burglarize the office of Ellsberg's psychiatrist, so as to discredit the leak.[11] At around the same time, as a historian and journalist has graphically reminded us, the White House could be found "literally laagered by a ring of dozens of silver Metro buses" so as to protect it from a horde of "half-naked students" quite willing to, for instance, carry around "the bleeding head of a lamb," not to mention throwing abuse at federal employees passing by in protest against the war.[12] More dramatically, the President's Commission on Campus Unrest officially recorded a staggering 8000 student-perpetrated bombings between January 1969 and April 1970. To these must be added the race riots experienced in locations as varied as Harlem (1964); Watts, LA (1965); and Newark (1967), not to mention the disturbances, seen in more than a hundred cities after the 1968 assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., that burned across the inner cities of Washington DC, Baltimore, and Chicago. By the time Nixon took office, Daniel Patrick Moynihan's 1968 dictum that the nation was exhibiting "the qualities of an individual going through a nervous breakdown" seemed rather appropriate.[13]

The explosive social and cultural tensions that engulfed the nation as Nixon entered the White House magnified the dark side of the President's character and the baleful effects of his inner demons. The poisonous inheritance of previous administrations' policies in Indochina had crystallized in a growing "credibility gap" between official lies or half-truths and reality, at a time when civil rights struggles reached their apex and university students were rejecting accepted norms of behavior in areas ranging from family relations to accepted hierarchies.[14] Nixon was singularly ill-suited to lead the nation at this transitional moment, during which government excesses on behalf of national security and low political "dirty tricks" were becoming no more acceptable than Jim Crow or women's submission to their husbands. It may indeed be true enough that the CRP did nothing on behalf of Richard Nixon that had not been done before by Franklin D. Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy, or Lyndon B. Johnson. It is also reasonable to note that the frenzied attack against the administration as Watergate unraveled was fueled by an instinctive, growing dislike of the President (which Nixon took good care to feed) on the part of a significant sector of the press and the intellectual classes. Yet the fact remains that the President's actions, and those of his subordinates, were both wrong and criminal.

Watergate, in truth, is a testament to the enduring resilience of liberal democracy in the United States. The Watergate investigations were doubtlessly influenced by political partisanship and the pursuit of self-aggrandizement on the part of some of the President's adversaries. Despite this, and indeed perhaps because of it, it remains a prime example of the capacity of American institutions to adjust and evolve in response to demands for greater individual freedom and stricter standards of conduct on the part of government officials and public representatives. After Watergate, presidents cloak themselves in imperial robes and take freedom of the press and the separation of powers lightly at their own peril.

[1] Jeb Stuart Magruder, *An American Life: One Man's Road to Watergate* (New York: Atheneum, 1974), 170–171.

[2] As quoted in John Ehrlichman, *Witness to Power: The Nixon Years* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1982), 346.

[3] Magruder, *An American Life*, 195.

[4] See for instance David Greenberg, "The Unsolved Mysteries of Watergate," *The New York Times*, June 5, 2005.

[5] See for instance Joan Hoff, *Nixon Reconsidered*, 301–346.

[6] After the leak of the Pentagon Papers, for instance, Nixon believed Daniel Ellsberg was part of a "conspiracy" going back to the days of the Hiss case. H. R. Haldeman, *The Haldeman Diaries: Inside the Nixon White House* (New York: Berkley Books, 1995), 368, 377, 381.

[7] Raymond Price, *With Nixon* (New York: Viking Press, 1977), 188–191; James Keogh, *President Nixon and the Press* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1972), 39, 132–145; Magruder, *American Life*, 196–197; Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward, *All the President's Men* (London: Bloomsbury, 1998), 87, 233.

[8] Seymour M. Hersh, *The Price of Power: Kissinger in the White House* (London: Faber, 1983), 61–62, 86–88, 319; Matthew Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger, Partners in Power* (New York: Penguin, 2007), 118–124.

[9] See for instance Ron Briley, "Nixon and Historical Memory," *Perspectives* 36, no. 3 (1996).

[10] Henry Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1982), 1184.

[11] Hersh, 383–401, and David Greenberg, *Nixon's Shadow: The History of an Image* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2003), 114–116, 323–29.

[12] Godfrey Hodgson, *The Gentleman from New York: Daniel Patrick Moynihan, A Biography* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), 151.

[13] As quoted in Robert Mason, *Richard Nixon and the Quest for a New Majority* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 22.

[14] See for instance Hunter S. Thompson, *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72* (London: HarperCollins, 1973).

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