

Watergate: The Scandal That Brought Down President Nixon

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President Richard Nixon (right) meets with his chief advisers (from left) H.R. Haldeman, Dwight Chapin and John D. Ehrlichman in the Oval Office of the White House in Washington, D.C., March 13, 1970. Because of Watergate, Haldeman and Ehrlichman resigned from their jobs, Chapin went to jail for nine months for lying to a jury about the scandal and President Nixon resigned from office. Library of Congress

On June 17, 1972, five men were arrested after breaking into the headquarters of the Democratic National Committee. Its offices were located in the Watergate Hotel in Washington, D.C. The burglars were not ordinary thieves. They carried wiretaps to install on telephones and brought cameras to photograph documents. One of the five burglars was James McCord, the security adviser for Richard Nixon's campaign, known as the Committee to Re-elect the President, or CREEP. Although the incident failed to make the front pages of major newspapers, it soon became the most notorious political scandal in American history.

In the bitter climate of the late 1960s and early 1970s, President Nixon believed strongly that a cultural war was being fought between "us" and "them." To Nixon, "us" meant the conservative, middle- and working-class, church-going Americans. These were people who believed the United States was in danger of crumbling. "Them" meant the young, defiant, antiwar, liberal counterculture figures. These were Americans seeking to undercut traditional values, in Nixon's view.

Nixon, a Republican, would stop at nothing to win this war of hearts and minds. In the end, he even was willing to break the law to do it.

The Plumbers tried to stop leaks to the press

In 1971, the White House established a group known as the "Plumbers." They were operatives assigned to eliminate administration leaks to the press. Their first target was Daniel Ellsberg. Ellsberg was a military expert who had worked on the Pentagon Papers, a study highly critical of America's policy and actions in the Vietnam War. This information was only supposed to be shared and used within the government. However, Ellsberg leaked the Pentagon Papers to The New York Times. The Plumbers vandalized the office of Ellsberg's psychiatrist, hoping to find information to destroy Ellsberg's reputation.

Later in 1971, John Mitchell resigned as U.S. attorney general to become head of CREEP. The campaign raised millions of dollars in illegal contributions. It also secretly allocated several hundred thousand to pay for the Plumbers. A White House adviser named G. Gordon Liddy suggested that the Democratic headquarters be bugged. He also advised that other funds should be used to bribe, threaten or smear Nixon's opponents.

After the arrest of the burglars, Nixon suggested giving payments, or hush money, to those involved in order to keep them quiet. At all costs, he wanted to keep anyone from connecting the Watergate burglary to the White House. He suggested that the FBI block any investigation of the break-in. He recommended that staffers lie if they were questioned by investigators or forced to testify in court.

Nixon was re-elected in 1972

The Watergate cover-up was initially successful. Nixon went on to win re-election in 1972 in a landslide, capturing 49 of 50 states against Democratic candidate George McGovern. Nixon's historic victory occurred despite a headline story in The Washington Post that suggested the White House was indeed connected to Watergate.

When the burglars were put on trial in January 1973, James McCord admitted in a letter that members of the Nixon administration had ordered the Watergate break-in. A Senate committee was appointed to investigate. Nixon gave in to public pressure and appointed Special Prosecutor Archibald Cox to lead the investigation.

Soon, many high-level White House officials resigned for their involvement in the scandal. They included Nixon's Chief of Staff, Bob Haldeman, and his Adviser on Domestic Affairs, John Ehrlichman. In an unrelated case, Vice President Spiro Agnew resigned while facing charges of bribery and tax evasion. Nixon's own personal counsel, John Dean, agreed to cooperate with the Senate. He testified about Nixon's involvement in the cover-up. In a televised speech, Nixon assured the American public, "I am not a crook." It seemed like a matter of Nixon's word against Dean's.

The tapes would reveal the truth

Then a White House aide told the Senate committee that Nixon had recorded most conversations held in the Oval Office. Nixon flatly refused to submit these recordings to the committee. When Cox demanded the surrender of the tapes, Nixon had him fired. Public outcry pressured Nixon to provide typewritten transcripts of the tapes. The tape transcripts further damaged Nixon, revealing a crude and bullying leader.

Finally, in *U.S. v. Nixon*, the Supreme Court declared Nixon was not protected by executive privilege in this case. The president was ordered to give the evidence to the Congress.

Nixon resigned to avoid being impeached

By this time, the House Judiciary Committee had already drawn up Articles Of Impeachment, threatening to remove him from office. He faced a trial before the Senate, but Nixon knew he did not have the votes there to save his presidency.

On August 8, 1974, Nixon resigned the office, becoming the first president to do so. His successor, Gerald Ford, promptly gave Nixon a full pardon for any crimes he may have committed while in office. The press and the public cried foul, but Ford defended his decision. He insisted the nation was better served by ending the long, national nightmare.

During his years in office, Nixon had brought a controversial end to the Vietnam War, opened relations with Communist China and watched NASA land astronauts on the moon. Despite these accomplishments, Watergate casts a dark shadow over Nixon's legacy.

Quiz

- 1 Read the sentence from the first paragraph of the article.

Although the incident failed to make the front pages of major newspapers, it soon became the most notorious political scandal in American history.

How does the word notorious affect the TONE of the sentence?

- (A) It suggests that the incident has become known only recently.
 - (B) It suggests that the incident is a well-known public disgrace.
 - (C) It conveys the sense that the incident is an unresolved secret.
 - (D) It conveys the sense that the incident has been mostly forgiven.
- 2 Read the sentence from the section "The Plumbers tried to stop leaks to the press."

He also advised that other funds should be used to bribe, threaten or smear Nixon's opponents.

Which other sentence from that section gives context for the meaning of "smear" as it is used above?

- (A) Ellsberg was a military expert who had worked on the Pentagon Papers, a study highly critical of America's policy and actions in the Vietnam War.
 - (B) The Plumbers vandalized the office of Ellsberg's psychiatrist, hoping to find information to destroy Ellsberg's reputation.
 - (C) After the arrest of the burglars, Nixon suggested giving payments, or hush money, to those involved in order to keep them quiet.
 - (D) At all costs, he wanted to keep anyone from connecting the Watergate burglary to the White House.
- 3 Which of the following MOST influenced Nixon to resign?
- (A) the damaging nature of the tapes surrendered to Congress
 - (B) the charges made against Vice President Spiro Agnew
 - (C) the resignation of other White House officials
 - (D) the public pressure to appoint a special prosecutor

- 4 Gerald Ford would MOST LIKELY agree with which of the following statements?
- (A) It was more important to heal the country than to punish Nixon.
 - (B) Nixon should not be prosecuted because he did nothing wrong.
 - (C) Watergate made people forget Nixon's many accomplishments.
 - (D) People should have shared their opinions before he pardoned Nixon.