

# Watergate: Nixon's Downfall

## MAIN IDEA

President Richard Nixon's involvement in the Watergate scandal forced him to resign from office.

## WHY IT MATTERS NOW

The Watergate scandal raised questions of public trust that still affect how the public and media skeptically view politicians.

## Terms & Names

- impeachment
- Watergate
- H. R. Haldeman
- John Ehrlichman
- John Mitchell
- Committee to Reelect the President
- John Sirica
- Saturday Night Massacre

On July 25, 1974, Representative Barbara Jordan of Texas, a member of the House Judiciary Committee, along with the other committee members, considered whether to recommend that President Nixon be impeached for “high crimes and misdemeanors.” Addressing the room, Jordan cited the Constitution in urging her fellow committee members to investigate whether impeachment was appropriate.

### ★ A PERSONAL VOICE BARBARA JORDAN

“ ‘We the people’—it is a very eloquent beginning. But when the Constitution of the United States was completed . . . I was not included in that ‘We the people’. . . . But through the process of amendment, interpretation, and court decision, I have finally been included in ‘We the people’. . . . Today . . . [my] faith in the Constitution is whole. It is complete. It is total. I am not going to sit here and be an idle spectator in the diminution, the subversion, the destruction of the Constitution. . . . Has the President committed offenses . . . which the Constitution will not tolerate? ”

—quoted in *Notable Black American Women*



▲ U.S. Representative  
Barbara Jordan,  
1974.

The committee eventually voted to recommend the **impeachment** of Richard Nixon for his role in the Watergate scandal. However, before Congress could take further action against him, the president resigned. Nixon's resignation, the first by a U.S. president, was the climax of a scandal that led to the imprisonment of 25 government officials and caused the most serious constitutional crisis in the United States since the impeachment of Andrew Johnson in 1868.

## President Nixon and His White House

The **Watergate** scandal centered on the Nixon administration's attempt to cover up a burglary of the Democratic National Committee (DNC) headquarters at the Watergate office and apartment complex in Washington, D.C. However, the



Watergate story began long before the actual burglary. Many historians believe that Watergate truly began with the personalities of Richard Nixon and those of his advisers, as well as with the changing role of the presidency.

**AN IMPERIAL PRESIDENCY** When Richard Nixon took office, the executive branch—as a result of the Great Depression, World War II, and the Cold War—had become the most powerful branch of government. In his book *The Imperial Presidency*, the historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., argued that by the time Richard Nixon became president, the executive branch had taken on an air of imperial, or supreme, authority.

President Nixon settled into this imperial role with ease. Nixon believed, as he told a reporter in 1980, that “a president must not be one of the crowd. . . . People . . . don’t want him to be down there saying, ‘Look, I’m the same as you.’” Nixon expanded the power of the presidency with little thought to constitutional checks, as when he impounded funds for federal programs that he opposed, or when he ordered troops to invade Cambodia without congressional approval. **A**

#### MAIN IDEA

#### Summarizing

**A** What is meant by “imperial presidency”?

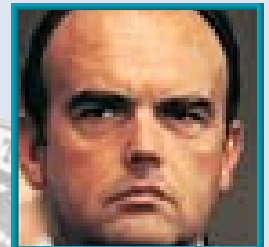
**THE PRESIDENT’S MEN** As he distanced himself from Congress, Nixon confided in a small and fiercely loyal group of advisers. They included **H. R. Haldeman**, White House chief of staff; **John Ehrlichman**, chief domestic adviser; and **John Mitchell**, Nixon’s former attorney general. These men had played key roles in Nixon’s 1968 election victory and now helped the president direct White House policy.

These men also shared President Nixon’s desire for secrecy and the consolidation of power. Critics charged that these men, through their personalities and their attitude toward the presidency, developed a sense that they were somehow above the law. This sense would, in turn, prompt President Nixon and his advisers to cover up their role in Watergate, and fuel the coming scandal.

#### The Inner Circle



**H.R. Haldeman**  
Chief of Staff



**John Ehrlichman**  
Chief Domestic Advisor



**John N. Mitchell**  
Attorney General



**John W. Dean III**  
Presidential Counsel

## The Drive Toward Reelection

Throughout his political career, Richard Nixon lived with the overwhelming fear of losing elections. By the end of the 1972 reelection campaign, Nixon’s campaign team sought advantages by any means possible, including an attempt to steal information from the DNC headquarters.

#### MAIN IDEA

#### Analyzing Motives

**B** Why would the Nixon campaign team take such a risky action as breaking into the opposition’s headquarters?

**A BUNGLED BURGLARY** At 2:30 A.M., June 17, 1972, a guard at the Watergate complex in Washington, D.C., caught five men breaking into the campaign headquarters of the DNC. The burglars planned to photograph documents outlining Democratic Party strategy and to place wiretaps, or “bugs,” on the office telephones. The press soon discovered that the group’s leader, James McCord, was a former CIA agent. He was also a security coordinator for a group known as the **Committee to Reelect the President** (CRP). John Mitchell, who had resigned as attorney general to run Nixon’s reelection campaign, was the CRP’s director. **B**

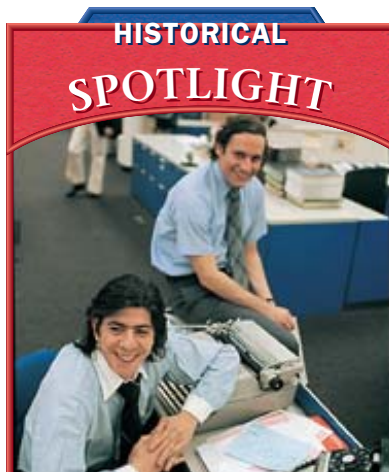


Just three days after the burglary, H. R. Haldeman noted in his diary Nixon's near obsession with how to respond to the break-in.

### A PERSONAL VOICE H. R. HALDEMAN

“The P[resident] was concerned about what our counterattack is. . . . He raised it again several times during the day, and it obviously is bothering him. . . . He called at home tonight, saying that he wanted to change the plan for his press conference and have it on Thursday instead of tomorrow, so that it won't look like he's reacting to the Democratic break-in thing.”

—The Haldeman Diaries



## HISTORICAL SPOTLIGHT

### WOODWARD AND BERNSTEIN

Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein of the *Washington Post* seemed an unlikely team. Woodward, 29 (at right in the photo above), had graduated from Yale, while the 28-year-old Bernstein was a college dropout.

As the two men dug deeper into the Watergate scandal, a mysterious inside source known only as Deep Throat helped them to uncover the scandal. Nearly 30 years later, the reporters still refuse to identify their famous source.

While people lauded the two reporters for their dogged determination, some Nixon officials remain bitter toward them.

“I really believe [they] were on a personal crusade to bring down a president,” said Gerald Warren, Nixon's deputy press secretary. Woodward denied that charge, saying, “We tried to do our job and, in fact, if you look at it, our coverage was pretty conservative.”

The cover-up quickly began. Workers shredded all incriminating documents in Haldeman's office. The White House, with President Nixon's consent, asked the CIA to urge the FBI to stop its investigations into the burglary on the grounds of national security. In addition, the CRP passed out nearly \$450,000 to the Watergate burglars to buy their silence after they were indicted in September of 1972. **C**

Throughout the 1972 campaign, the Watergate burglary generated little interest among the American public and media. Only the *Washington Post* and two of its reporters, Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, kept on the story. In a series of articles, the reporters uncovered information that linked numerous members of the administration to the burglary. The White House denied each new *Post* allegation. Upon learning of an upcoming story that tied him to the burglars, John Mitchell told Bernstein, “That's the most sickening thing I ever heard.”

The firm White House response to the charges, and its promises of imminent peace in Vietnam, proved effective in the short term. In November, Nixon was reelected by a landslide over liberal Democrat George S. McGovern. But Nixon's popular support was soon to unravel.

## The Cover-Up Unravels

In January 1973, the trial of the Watergate burglars began. The trial's presiding judge, **John Sirica**, made clear his belief that the men had not acted alone. On March 20, a few days before the burglars were scheduled to be sentenced, James McCord sent a letter to Sirica, in which he indicated that he had lied under oath. He also hinted that powerful members of the Nixon administration had been involved in the break-in.

**THE SENATE INVESTIGATES WATERGATE** McCord's revelation of possible White House involvement in the burglary aroused public interest in Watergate. President Nixon moved quickly to stem the growing concern. On April 30, 1973, Nixon dismissed White House counsel John Dean and announced the resignations of Haldeman, Ehrlichman, and Attorney General Richard Kleindienst, who had recently

replaced John Mitchell following Mitchell's resignation. The president then went on television and denied any attempt at a cover-up. He announced that he was

### MAIN IDEA

#### Chronological Order

**C** What steps did the White House take to cover up its involvement in the Watergate break-in?





appointing a new attorney general, Elliot Richardson, and was authorizing him to appoint a special prosecutor to investigate Watergate. “There can be no whitewash at the White House,” Nixon said.

The president’s reassurances, however, came too late. In May 1973, the Senate began its own investigation of Watergate. A special committee, chaired by Senator Samuel James Ervin of North Carolina, began to call administration officials to give testimony. Throughout the summer millions of Americans sat by their televisions as the “president’s men” testified one after another.

**STARTLING TESTIMONY** John Dean delivered the first bomb. In late June, during more than 30 hours of testimony, Dean provided a startling answer to Senator Howard Baker’s repeated question, “What did the president know and when did he know it?” The former White House counsel declared that President Nixon had been deeply involved in the cover-up. Dean referred to one meeting in which he and the president, along with several advisers, discussed strategies for continuing the deceit.

The White House strongly denied Dean’s charges. The hearings had suddenly reached an impasse as the committee attempted to sort out who was telling the truth. The answer came in July from an unlikely source: presidential aide Alexander Butterfield. Butterfield stunned the committee when he revealed that Nixon had taped virtually all of his presidential conversations. Butterfield later claimed that the taping system was installed “to help Nixon write his memoirs.” However, for the Senate committee, the tapes were the key to revealing what Nixon knew and when he knew it. **D**

#### MAIN IDEA

#### Drawing Conclusions

**D** What was significant about the revelation that Nixon taped his conversations?

#### MAIN IDEA

#### Summarizing

**E** What events led to the Saturday Night Massacre?

#### THE SATURDAY NIGHT MASSACRE

A year-long battle for the “Nixon tapes” followed. Archibald Cox, the special prosecutor whom Elliot Richardson had appointed to investigate the case, took the president to court in October 1973 to obtain the tapes. Nixon refused and ordered Attorney General Richardson to fire Cox. In what became known as the **Saturday Night Massacre**, Richardson refused the order and resigned. The deputy attorney general also refused the order, and he was fired. Solicitor General Robert Bork finally fired Cox. However, Cox’s replacement, Leon Jaworski, proved equally determined to get the tapes. Several months after the “massacre,” the House Judiciary Committee began examining the possibility of an impeachment hearing. **E**

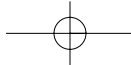
The entire White House appeared to be under siege. Just days before the Saturday Night Massacre, Vice President Spiro Agnew had resigned after it was revealed that he had accepted bribes from Maryland engineering firms, as governor of Maryland, and during his term as vice president. Acting under the Twenty-fifth

*“Divine right went out with the American Revolution and doesn’t belong to White House aides.”*

SENATOR SAM ERVIN



▲ The Watergate hearings, chaired by Senator Sam Ervin, shown (top left) with Sam Dash, chief counsel to the Senate Watergate Committee, made headlines throughout the summer of 1973.



Amendment, Nixon nominated the House minority leader, Gerald R. Ford, as his new vice-president. Congress quickly confirmed the nomination.

## The Fall of a President

In March 1974, a grand jury indicted seven presidential aides on charges of conspiracy, obstruction of justice, and perjury. The investigation was closing in on the president of the United States.



recorder and  
tape from the  
1970s.

**NIXON RELEASES THE TAPES** In the spring of 1974, President Nixon told a television audience that he was releasing 1,254 pages of edited transcripts of White House conversations about Watergate. Nixon's offering failed to satisfy investigators, who demanded the unedited tapes. Nixon refused, and the case went before the Supreme Court. On July 24, 1974, the high court ruled unanimously that the president must surrender the tapes. The Court rejected Nixon's argument that doing so would violate national security. Evidence involving possible

criminal activity could not be withheld, even by a president. President Nixon maintained that he had done nothing wrong. At a press conference in November 1973, he proclaimed defiantly, "I am not a crook."

**THE PRESIDENT RESIGNS** Even without holding the original tapes, the House Judiciary Committee determined that there was enough evidence to impeach Richard Nixon. On July 27, the committee approved three articles of impeachment, charging the president with obstruction of justice, abuse of power, and contempt of Congress for refusing to obey a congressional subpoena to release the tapes.

### Background

Although historians sued for access to thousands of hours of tapes, it was not until some 21 years later, in 1996, that an agreement was made for over 3,700 hours of tape to be made public.

## Analyzing Political Cartoons

### THE WHITE HOUSE TAPES

During the Watergate hearings a bombshell exploded when it was revealed that President Nixon secretly tape-recorded all conversations in the Oval Office. Although Nixon hoped the tapes would one day help historians document the triumphs of his presidency, they were used to confirm his guilt.

#### SKILLBUILDER Analyzing Political Cartoons

1. What does this cartoon imply about privacy during President Nixon's term in office?
2. What building has been transformed into a giant tape recorder?

SEE SKILLBUILDER HANDBOOK,  
PAGE R24.



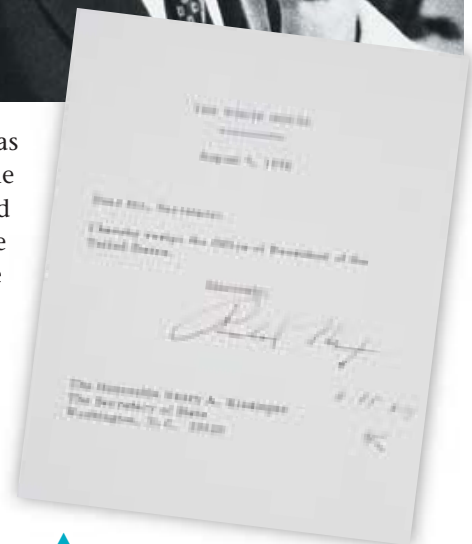
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On August 5, Nixon released the tapes. They contained many gaps, and one tape revealed a disturbing 18½-minute gap. According to the White House, Rose Mary Woods, President Nixon’s secretary, accidentally erased part of a conversation between H. R. Haldeman and Nixon. More importantly, a tape dated June 23, 1972—six days after the Watergate break-in—that contained a conversation between Nixon and Haldeman, disclosed the evidence investigators needed. Not only had the president known about his administration’s role in the burglary, he had agreed to the plan to cover up and obstruct the FBI’s investigation.

The evidence now seemed overwhelming. On August 8, 1974, before the full House vote on the articles of impeachment began, President Nixon announced his resignation from office. Defiant as always, Nixon admitted no guilt. He merely said that some of his judgments “were wrong.” The next day, Nixon and his wife, Pat, returned home to California. A short time later, Gerald Ford was sworn in as the 38th president of the United States.

**THE EFFECTS OF WATERGATE** The effects of Watergate have endured long after Nixon’s resignation. Eventually, 25 members of the Nixon Administration were convicted and served prison terms for crimes connected to Watergate. Along with the divisive war in Vietnam, Watergate produced a deep disillusionment with the “imperial” presidency. In the years following Vietnam and Watergate, the American public and the media developed a general cynicism about public officials that still exists today. Watergate remains the scandal and investigative story against which all others are measured.



▲ With wife Pat looking on, Richard Nixon bids farewell to his staff on his final day as president. Nixon’s resignation letter is shown above.



**ASSESSMENT**

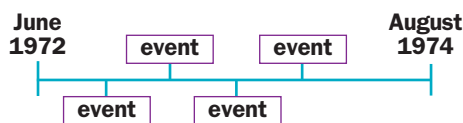
**1. TERMS & NAMES** For each term or name, write a sentence explaining its significance.

- impeachment
- John Ehrlichman
- Committee to Reelect the President
- John Sirica
- Watergate
- John Mitchell
- Saturday Night Massacre
- H. R. Haldeman

**MAIN IDEA**

**2. TAKING NOTES**

Use a time line like the one below to trace the events of the Watergate scandal.



Which event made Nixon's downfall certain?

**CRITICAL THINKING**

**3. HYPOTHESIZING**

If Nixon had admitted to and apologized for the Watergate break-in, how might subsequent events have been different? Explain.

**Think About:**

- the extent of the cover-up
- the impact of the cover-up
- Nixon’s public image

**4. ANALYZING EVENTS**

How did the Watergate scandal create a constitutional crisis?

**5. EVALUATING**

Do you think that Nixon would have been forced to resign if the tapes had not existed? Explain your answer.