

The Political Conflict and Compromise of The Watergate Scandal

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Historical Paper

1866 Words

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“No one -- absolutely no one -- is above the law.” - Leon Jaworski

Thesis

In the 1970s, during the era of the Nixon Administration, the break-in of the Democratic National Committee headquarters in the Watergate hotel, nicknamed Watergate, shaped political history, and it redefined executive power in America. Watergate created political conflict between government personnel, organizations and United States citizens, contained a compromise involving White House transcripts, and it ended with the compromise of President Nixon's impeachment, which later led to his pardon.

Introduction

The 1972 scandal defined Richard Nixon's presidency. Following the Vietnam War and the release of the Pentagon Papers, the Nixon Administration had low public ratings. Nixon had hopes of achieving a second presidential term, however some members of his administration felt Nixon would not get the substantial amount of votes necessary to win. An organization known as CREEP, or the Committee to Re-election of the President, along with members in President Nixon's Administration organized a break in to the Democratic National Committee headquarters in the Watergate hotel. Named after the hotel, the initial break in lead to a series of political mishaps, which formulated into the largest political scandal in United States history. The break-in and eventual trials created a conflict between government officials and American citizens. Due to the trials and Nixon's investigations, many White House officials took sides supporting Nixon or going against him. The corruption that grew with the scandal led to resignations and evictions. The scandal also caused rifts between American citizens, causing distrust of the government. The divided sides eventually began to converge as a compromise was

reached within the Judiciary and Legislative branches to impeach Nixon. A few months after, the compromise was completed by President Gerald Ford, when he pardoned Nixon, elevating most of the remaining tensions and putting Watergate behind America.

1968-1972

Nixon was first elected in 1968, beating Democratic competitor Hubert Humphrey in a landslide. He based his presidency around limiting federal power and fixing Vietnam ¹. Vietnam, highlighted by Nixon's Vietnamization to bring troops home, was said to be the beginning of the tensions in the Nixon Administration. After his plan failed to pull all the troops out of Vietnam, and turn the war over to the Vietnamese soldiers as he promised, Nixon's approval ratings lowered. The involvement in Vietnam began a slow decrease in ratings as his Presidency progressed. When he began his reelection campaign, America was still divided due to the continuation of the war, which added to the pressure on his administration ². In addition, the 1971 release of the Pentagon Papers, which led to the break in of Daniel Ellsberg's office, added to diminishing the Administration's public appearance. Nixon and his advisors decided, after the start of a new campaign, that a forceful reelection tactic was necessary, and "their aggressive tactics included what turned out to be illegal espionage" ³.

The Break In

¹ Etothex, et al. "An Age of Limits." *US History*, 1.0 ed., Free Software Foundation, Inc, 2006, pp. 798–809.

American Hist. Book

² History.com Staff. "Watergate Scandal." *History.com*, A + E Networks, 2009, www.history.com/topics/watergate.

³ History.com Staff. "Watergate Scandal." *History.com*, A + E Networks, 2009, www.history.com/topics/watergate.

On June 17, 1972, five men broke into the Democratic National Committee's Washington headquarters in the Watergate Hotel. The burglars, who were employed by members of the Committee for the Re-Election of the President, were tasked with bugging telephones, placing recording devices in rooms and stealing papers from the Democratic Headquarters. However the on-duty security guard for the hotel, Frank Wills, had suspicions of illegal activity and alerted the police of a possible break-in to the facility, which led to the burglars arrest the same night. James McCord, Virgilio Gonzales, Frank Sturgis, Eugenio Martinez and Bernard Baker were charged with burglary and attempted interception of telephone lines following their arrest ⁴. After the break-in, the CIA and FBI became involved with the local investigations, and they later discovered that three attempts were made previously to break into the hotel, which were each conducted by James McCord. However, initially the burglary led to an investigation of the Committee to Re-elect the President, or CREEP. It also led to two Washington Post reporters, Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, getting called in to report on the story for the Washington Post ⁵. The break in started the political scandal that would last another two years.

At first, Americans paid little attention to Watergate, even after Woodward and Bernstein released their first article, "GOP Security Aide Among Those Arrested," on June 19, 1972. The article went into detail concerning one of the burglars, James McCord, who was on the presidential reelection committee, which spurred their commitment to the story ⁶. Woodward and

⁴ Woodward, Bob, and Carl Bernstein. "GOP Security Aide Among Five Arrested in Bugging Affair." *The Washington Post*, WP Company, 19 June 1972, www.washingtonpost.com/politics/gop-security-aide-among-five-arrested-in-bugging-affair/2012/06/07/gJQAYTdzKV_story.html?utm_term=.849b62277c4d.

⁵ "The Watergate Story." *The Washington Post*, WP Company, www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/special/watergate/part1.html

⁶ Woodward, Bob, and Carl Bernstein. "GOP Security Aide Among Five Arrested in Bugging Affair." *The Washington Post*, WP Company, 19 June 1972,

Bernstein continued to release reports after the initial public curiosity died, and after their continued commitment to the story, Woodward and Bernstein finally gained publicity for their efforts. Their news articles and connection with an internal source, now known as Mark Felt, helped keep the public informed and aided the federal investigations⁷. Five months after the break in, with little linked to Nixon himself, America reelected Nixon for his second presidential term on November of 1972. Amid the scandal, Nixon continued his second term where he left off on the first, however many aides noted a new obsession: Watergate⁸.

During Watergate

The political tensions, resulting in conflicts among Government officials and American citizens, caused by Watergate began shortly after the break in. With ties linked to CREEP, investigators and citizens started to speculate at Nixon and his administration's involvement⁹. The White House began to shred all incriminating documents, and asked the CIA to ask the FBI to stop their investigations¹⁰. The beginning speculations were fueled when a \$25,000 check was transferred to one of the burglar's accounts, which was tied back to the Nixon Campaign, and when CREEP was linked to over \$450,000 paid to the burglars to ensure their silence¹¹. Shortly

www.washingtonpost.com/politics/gop-security-aide-among-five-arrested-in-bugging-affair/2012/06/07/gJQAYTdzKV_story.html?utm_term=.849b62277c4d.

⁷ "The Watergate Story." The Washington Post, WP Company, www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/special/watergate/part1.html

⁸ Etothex, et al. "An Age of Limits." *US History*, 1.0 ed., Free Software Foundation, Inc, 2006, pp. 798–809.

American Hist. Book

⁹ "The Watergate Story." The Washington Post, WP Company, www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/special/watergate/part1.html

¹⁰ The news stories and connection with an internal source, now known as Mark Felt, helped keep the public informed and aided investigations #.

¹¹ "The Watergate Story." The Washington Post, WP Company, www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/special/watergate/timeline.html

after, the resignations of White House authorities, including John Ehrlichman and H.R. Haldeman, as well as the convictions of G. Liddy and James McCord, added to the tensions. With the continuing investigations and increasing corruption linked to within the White House, it was soon determined that “Nixon's aides had run a massive campaign of political spying and sabotage,”¹².

The conflict escalated as the scandal continued to unfold, leading to convictions, resignations and increasing speculations among the American people. The public rating for Nixon and his administration continued to plummet as the evidence grew and with multiple ties to the Nixon Administration, the Senate Watergate Committee launched an investigative series of trials on May 18, 1973¹³. The trials started with televised hearing headed by Archibald Cox¹⁴. A month after the start of the hearings, the former presidential accounts secretary revealed, during his testimony, that all the conversations in the White House were recorded¹⁵. The committee then demanded rights to the tapes and transcripts. After being ordered to turn in the tapes, Nixon refused and disconnected the White House recording devices. In October, a compromise was proposed between Nixon and Senator John Stennis, in which Stennis would listen to the tapes and provide a summary to special prosecutor Archibald Cox. However, Cox refused the offer and Nixon didn't give any further compromises. Later in the month, Nixon

¹² “The Watergate Story.” The Washington Post, WP Company, www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/special/watergate/part1.html

¹³ See Appendix A

¹⁴ “The Watergate Story.” The Washington Post, WP Company, www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/special/watergate/part1.html

¹⁵ “The Watergate Story.” The Washington Post, WP Company, www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/special/watergate/timeline.html

attempted to fire Cox, “leading several Justice Department officials to resign in protest”¹⁶. This became known as the famous Saturday Night Massacre. When his plan failed, Nixon agreed to hand over some of the tapes, but not all; he managed to retain his innocence after releasing edited tapes, and his monumental “I am not a Crook” speech. However, a eighteen-and-a-half minute break in one of the subpoenaed tapes made the supreme court rule that Nixon must turn over the full transcripts, voiding his claim of executive power¹⁷.

On March 1, 1974, the grand jury indicted seven of Nixon’s former aides with charges of obstruction of justice and impeding investigations. The seven indicted included former Chief of Staff H.R Haldeman, former Attorney General John Mitchell, former Assistant for Domestic Affairs John Ehrlichman. This diminished any credibility Nixon and his administration had left, and by July 27, 1974, the House of Representatives had come to a consensus: Nixon was guilty. They voted towards impeachment and he was charged with the first 3 articles of impeachment: obstruction of justice, for refusing to hand over the tapes; abuse of executive power, for violating citizen rights and impairing the justice system; and failure to produce required papers or evidence without lawful cause. The start of the final compromise began with Nixon’s resignation. The House of Representatives came to the consensus that resignation, one way or another, would be for the betterment of the United States and help reunited the divided country. With their decision, they gave Nixon two options: resignation or impeachment. His final decision is a compromise because it is a wordless agreement with the House of Representatives: either he

¹⁶ History.com Staff. “Watergate Scandal.” *History.com*, A + E Networks, 2009, www.history.com/topics/watergate.

¹⁷ “The Watergate Story.” The Washington Post, WP Company, www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/special/watergate/timeline.html

resigns and gets to keep what dignity he has left, or he is impeached and his political career officially ruined. Following his charging, Nixon became the first President of the United States to resign on August 8, 1974¹⁸.

The Aftermath

On August 9, 1974, one day after Nixon's resignation, the 38th president, Gerald Ford was sworn in under the twenty-fifth amendment¹⁹. Ford relayed to the American people in his inaugural address, "the lesson of Watergate was that 'our Constitution works' and that 'our great Republic is a Government of laws and not of men'"²⁰. This made it believable to Americans that Ford's address was "the end to their Watergate nightmare," and things would become relatively normal²¹. However, tensions still existed within the White House concerning Watergate. While many members of the Nixon administration were convicted or removed from office, a few still held desirable spots in the White House. Additionally, over seventy staff, holding minimal positions, were also from Nixon's administration. In addressing the remaining members, many of Ford's advisors wanted to remove the remaining men, in hopes of bringing justice for Americans and the political party²². However, Ford "desired continuity and disapproved of a 'purge'"²³.

¹⁸ Etothex, et al. "An Age of Limits." *US History*, 1.0 ed., Free Software Foundation, Inc, 2006, pp. 798–809.

American Hist. Book

¹⁹ Etothex, et al. "An Age of Limits." *US History*, 1.0 ed., Free Software Foundation, Inc, 2006, pp. 798–809.

American Hist. Book

²⁰ Laura Kalman, Gerald Ford, the Nixon Pardon, and the Rise of the Right , 58 *Clev. St. L. Rev.* 349 (2010) available at <http://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/clevstlrev/vol58/iss2/5>

²¹ Laura Kalman, Gerald Ford, the Nixon Pardon, and the Rise of the Right , 58 *Clev. St. L. Rev.* 349 (2010) available at <http://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/clevstlrev/vol58/iss2/5>

²² Laura Kalman, Gerald Ford, the Nixon Pardon, and the Rise of the Right , 58 *Clev. St. L. Rev.* 349 (2010) available at <http://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/clevstlrev/vol58/iss2/5>

²³ Laura Kalman, Gerald Ford, the Nixon Pardon, and the Rise of the Right , 58 *Clev. St. L. Rev.* 349 (2010) available at <http://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/clevstlrev/vol58/iss2/5>

Another problem needed to be addressed in a timely manner: former President Nixon. The remaining Nixon supporters within the White House affected Ford's decision on what to do with the former president and his records. After much debate Ford and his advisors decided a quick pardon "would be greeted by 'a national sigh of relief'" ²⁴. Ford pardoned Nixon, freeing him of any injustices done against America while he was president in September of 1974, which completed the compromise started by his resignation. Ford pardoning Nixon is a compromise between two political administrations and the citizens of America. Within the White House and government system, Nixon's pardon was also seen as a compromise between members of the Ford administration and Nixon's remaining men, which attributed lessening the tensions within the White House. It also freed the country of any remaining tensions regarding Nixon, attributing to the compromise to American citizens. Watergate left a lasting impression on American politics. Many view Watergate as having a "cleansing effect on the nation's political process:" congress enacted new laws, new processes for elections were introduced and politicians opened their financial affairs ²⁵. Watergate is also a reminder for all presidents following Nixon's resignation: nobody, not even the president of the United States, is above the law. It is the best known political scandal in America's history, and Watergate is highlighted because of the political tensions, politician involvements, and the resulting impeachment that ended it.

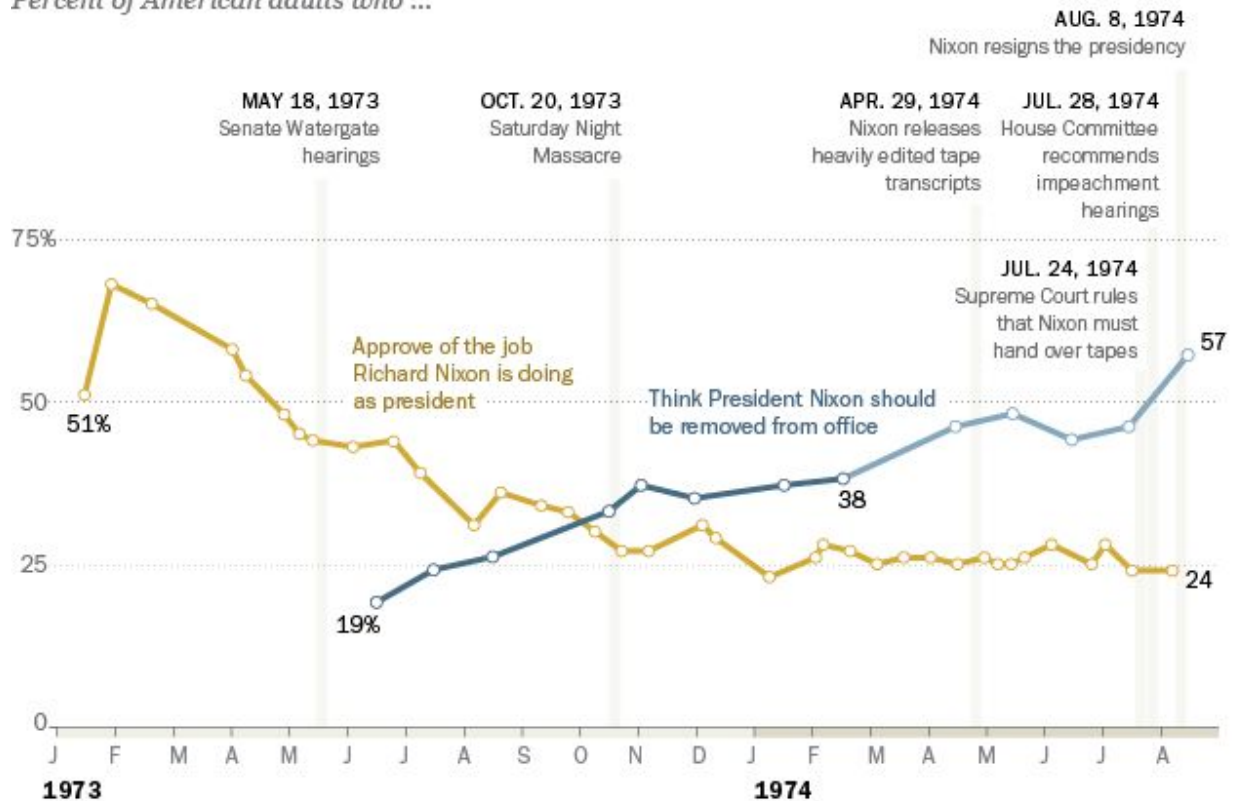
²⁴ Laura Kalman, Gerald Ford, the Nixon Pardon, and the Rise of the Right , 58 *Clev. St. L. Rev.* 349 (2010) available at <http://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/clevstlrev/vol58/iss2/5>

²⁵ Staff, U.S. News. "Effects of Watergate: The Good and the Bad." *U.S. News & World Report*, U.S. News & World Report, 8 Aug. 2014, www.usnews.com/news/articles/2014/08/08/effects-of-watergate-the-good-and-the-bad.

Appendix A

How Watergate Changed Public Opinion of Richard Nixon

Percent of American adults who ...



Source: Gallup polls, January 1973 to August 1974

Note: Question on Nixon's removal from office June 1973 to February 1974 was, "Do you think President Nixon should be impeached and compelled to leave the Presidency, or not?" and from April 1974 to August 1974 was, following an explanation of the impeachment process and a question on wrongdoing, "Do you think [Nixon's] actions are serious enough to warrant his being removed from the Presidency, or not?"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Kohut, Andrew. "How Watergate Changed Public Opinion of Richard Nixon." *Pew*

Research, assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/12/2014/08/FT_Nixon.png.

Shows the approval ratings for Nixon (yellow line) and the percentage of citizens vying for removal of office (blue line).

Annotated Bibliography

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Primary Sources

Lewis, Alfred. "5 Held in Plot to Bug Democrats' Office Here." *The Washington Post*, WP Company, 18 June

1972,

www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2002/05/31/AR2005111001227.html.

Alfred Lewis reported on Watergate the day following the breakin. His article went into detail about the burglars and their condition at the time. This helped me write my first few paragraphs and learn more about the background of who was involved.

Oval Office 741-2; June 23, 1973 ; White House Tapes; Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba

Linda, California.

Oval Office 886-8; March 21, 1973 ; White House Tapes; Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum,

Yorba Linda, California.

The copies of the Oval Office tapes were released by the Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum in Linda California. The library has hundreds of documents and articles about Nixon and similar topics. This source helped me better relate to specific characters involved and their mindsets.

"Richard Nixon's Resignation Letter and Gerald Ford's Pardon." *National Archives Foundation*, www.archivesfoundation.org/documents/richard-nixon-resignation-letter-gerald-ford-pardon/.

While short, the resignation letter of Nixon was an important part of his presidency. The National Archive also explained the events leading to his resignation and President Grant's pardoning of Nixon. This helped sum up Watergate, in my head, and aided my conclusion in my paper.

"Watergate Trial Conversations." *Richard Nixon: Presidential Library and Museum*, National Archives and Records Administration, N.D.,

www.nixonlibrary.gov/forresearchers/find/tapes/watergate/trial/transcripts.php.

The Nixon Library supplies information from the Presidential Library and Museum in Yorba Linda, California. This site provided a large amount of primary sources, including hundreds of pages of transcripts recorded in the Oval Office. The transcripts helped uncover who

the participants of Watergate were, including Nixon himself. It also detailed who knew what during the investigations and how everything unfolded.

Woodward, Bob, and Carl Bernstein. “GOP Security Aide Among Five Arrested in Bugging Affair.” *The*

Washington Post, WP Company, 19 June 1972,

www.washingtonpost.com/politics/gop-security-aide-among-five-arrested-in-bugging-affair/2012/06/07/gJQAYTdzKV_story.html?utm_term=.849b62277c4d.

Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein's article “GOP Security Aide Among Five Arrested in Bugging Affair,” helped summarize the start of Watergate. Woodward and Bernstein were the main reporters on the Watergate story, who both claimed fame due to their work. I used this article to better understand the arrested burglars and what happened following the breakin.

“The Watergate Story.” The Washington Post, WP Company,

www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/special/watergate/part1.html

Washington Post's article “The Watergate Story” provided a more in-depth explanation of the break-in and the events that happened mere days later. It also details the Post's role in the story and what topics Woodward and Bernstein, two Post reporters, investigated.

“Watergate.” *FBI*, FBI, 8 July 2011, vault.fbi.gov/watergate/. <https://vault.fbi.gov/watergate>.

The FBI's released files of watergate provided detailed explanations of various agencies role in the Watergate investigation, as well as an overall summary of the investigation and the events leading up to it. The files gave me more knowledge about the process of the Watergate Investigations and the roles of federal organizations, like the FBI.

Secondary Sources

Etothex, et al. “An Age of Limits.” *US History*, 1.0 ed., Free Software Foundation, Inc, 2006, pp. 798–809.

American Hist. Book

The American History text book, published through Free Software Foundation with a variety of contributing authors, contains a whole chapter on Watergate. I used the 24th chapter “An Age of Limits” to take notes on Nixon's presidency and what happened pre and post Watergate.

Farnsworth, Malcolm. "Watergate: The Scandal That Brought Down Richard Nixon." *Watergateinfo*, June 1995, n
watergate.info/.

Created by Malcolm Farnsworth in 1995, the website delved deeper into Nixon and the scandal that brought him down. This helped me gain new, in depth knowledge through the provided information. The website is full of information, and I could have written a ten page paper using just this site.

Feidel, Frank, and Hugh Sidey. "Richard M. Nixon." *The White House*, The Presidents of the United States of
 America, 2006,
www.whitehouse.gov/about-the-white-house/presidents/richard-m-nixon/.

This article is based off of Frank Freidel and Hugh Sidey's *The Presidents of the United States of America*, which was published in 2006. It gave a more concise information regarding Nixon's early years of vice presidency, his climb to presidency and his goals.

"Nixon Forms the CRP." *The Watergate Scandal*, University of Florida,
iml.jou.ufl.edu/projects/Fall06/Weiner/pages/People/creep.htm.

This website, published by the University of Florida, detailed factors others lacked. As I was initially confused by a number of named people from my various sources I decided to find a list of the major people involved. I used this source to help me better understand the people involved in Watergate. I learned their names and their involvement.

History.com Staff. "Watergate Scandal." *History.com*, A + E Networks, 2009,
www.history.com/topics/watergate.

Published by the History.com staff in 2009, it is a brief summary of Watergate. This source was one of my initial picks when deciding on a topic. It provided a more in-depth introduction to who ran Watergate and what political tensions led to the break-in.

Laura Kalman, Gerald Ford, the Nixon Pardon, and the Rise of the Right , 58 Clev. St. L. Rev. 349 (2010).
<http://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/clevstlrev/vol58/iss2/5>.

The paper, written by Laura Kalman, helped shed light on Ford's presidency and what happened after Nixon's impeachment. I used various quotes and information from the paper when writing my concluding paragraphs.

Solum, and Manheim. "Articles of Impeachment against Richard M. Nixon." 1999, pp. 1–9., doi:<https://www.colorado.edu/AmStudies/lewis/1025/articlesNixon.pdf>.

Written by two Colorado professors for a seminar, the short publication displays the final results of the trials against Nixon, as well as possible charges that were debunked. This source went into detail why Nixon was charged with the specific articles. Specific dates were also provided for when he broke specific rules, and to what extent.

Staff, U.S. News. "Effects of Watergate: The Good and the Bad." *U.S. News & World Report*, U.S. News & World Report, 8 Aug. 2014, www.usnews.com/news/articles/2014/08/08/effects-of-watergate-the-good-and-the-bad.

Published by U.S News, the "Effects of Watergate: The Good and the Bad" included in depth information about how Watergate affected politics and what role it plays today. It helped me write the content about after Watergate.