

What Was Watergate?



Investigative Reporters, Carl Bernstein & Bob Woodward of the *Washington Post*



President Nixon's Resignation Speech:
August 9, 1974

"*Watergate*" is a general term used to describe a complex web of political scandals between 1972 and 1974. The word refers to the Watergate Hotel in Washington D.C. In addition to the hotel, the Watergate complex houses many business offices. It was here that the office of the Democratic National Committee was burgled on June 17th, 1972. "Watergate" is now an all-encompassing term used to refer to:

- political burglary
- bribery
- extortion
- wiretapping (phone tapping)
- conspiracy
- obstruction of justice
- destruction of evidence
- tax fraud
- illegal use of the Central Intelligence Agency (C.I.A.)
- illegal use of the Federal Bureau of Investigations (F.B.I.)
- illegal campaign contributions
- use of public (taxpayers') money for private purposes

Background to Watergate:

1968: Richard Milhous Nixon (Republican) elected president. [Click here to read Nixon's first Inaugural Address.](#) Nixon was first elected to the US House of Representatives in 1947, campaigning strongly as an anti-communist. [Click here to read his maiden House speech.](#) He was subsequently elected to the Senate and became Vice-President under Eisenhower (1952-60). He was defeated in the 1960 presidential election by John F. Kennedy. No stranger to controversy, Nixon had been the subject of allegations in his 1952 vice-presidential campaign that led to the famous "checkers" speech.

1971: Publication of the "Pentagon Papers". These secret Defense Department documents on American involvement in the Vietnam war were leaked to the New York Times by an official in the Defense Department, Dr. Daniel Ellsberg. Nixon challenged the publication of the documents in the Supreme Court and lost when the court ruled 6-3 in favour of publication.

1970-1: A White House Special Investigations Unit is established, known as the "Plumbers". This secret group investigated the private lives of Nixon's critics and political enemies. It burgled the office of Ellsberg's psychiatrist in an attempt to discover damaging information.

Nixon was reported to have a "hate list", containing the names of many Democrats, James Reston, Jack Anderson, Jane Fonda, Barbra Streisand, Paul Newman, and even Gough Whitlam.

Somewhere around 1971, voice-activated tape recorders were installed in the Oval Office in the White House.

The Political Context:

The late 1960s were a time of great political and social upheaval in the United States. President Johnson had been destroyed by the Vietnam War and had announced that he would not contest the 1968 election. A spirit of unrest pervaded the college campuses. Demands for black rights were growing and a huge anti-war movement had developed.

Nixon was elected on a pledge of ending the war. During his term, Nixon and his Secretary of State, Dr. Henry Kissinger, opened up diplomatic relations with China (1971) and establishing "detente" with the Soviet Union. It has been argued that only a president with Nixon's well-established and hostile attitude to communism could have done these things. As the 1972 election approached, the Democrats opted for a liberal candidate, Senator George McGovern, a factor that led to the landslide win by Nixon. Nixon won 49 of the 50 states, McGovern winning only Massachusetts and Washington D.C. [Click here to read Nixon's second Inaugural Address.](#) During the campaign, McGovern had been forced to drop his vice-presidential running mate, Thomas Eagleton, after newspapers published reports of his previous mental illness. McGovern had earlier said he was 1000% behind Eagleton. Eagleton was replaced by Sargent Shriver.

The Watergate Burglary:

June 17th, 1972: Five men are arrested at the Watergate complex after burgling the offices of the Democratic National Committee. Charges are also laid against G. Gordon Liddy (CREEP) and E. Howard Hunt, a former White House aide. The "Watergate Seven" were sentenced by Judge John Sirica. [View ABC's report on the Watergate break-in on June 19th, 1972.](#)

January 1973: James McCord and others alleged that they had lied in earlier evidence at the urging of John Dean (counsel to the President) and John Mitchell (Attorney-General). These allegations of a cover-up and obstruction of justice by the highest law officers in the land blew Watergate wide open.

February 1973: The Senate votes (77-0) to establish a Select Committee on Presidential Campaign Activities, chaired by Senator Sam Ervin (Democrat - North Carolina)

April 30th 1973: Nixon announces the dismissal of Dean and the resignations of Haldeman and Erlichman, two of his closest advisers. The Attorney-General, Richard Kleindienst, also resigns and is replaced by Elliot Richardson. Archibald Cox is appointed as a special Watergate prosecutor. [Click here to read the full text of Nixon's Address to the Nation.](#)

May-October 1973: Senate hearings continue. Alexander Butterfield disclosed the existence of the White House tapes and a protracted legal battle begins. On 15 August, 1973, Nixon delivered a second Address to the Nation on Watergate. Nixon claimed "executive privilege" for the tapes and argued that he should not have to hand them over. Archibald Cox and the Senate Watergate committee request the Supreme Court instruct Nixon to surrender the tapes.

October 12th 1973: Nixon nominates Gerald Ford, Republican Minority leader in the House of Representatives, as vice-president, following the resignation of Spiro Agnew on bribery and tax evasion charges. Nixon's tax returns also come under investigation.

October 1973 - The Saturday Night Massacre: Nixon orders the Attorney-General to dismiss the special prosecutor, Archibald Cox. Richardson refuses to do so and resigns. His deputy is sacked for similarly refusing to carry out Nixon's order. Eventually, the Solicitor-General, Robert Bork, dismisses Cox. In the 1980s, Bork becomes a controversial Reagan nominee to the Supreme Court. His nomination is rejected by the Senate.

Late October 1973: Under immense pressure, Nixon releases some of the tapes. One tape is found to have a 18 and a half minute gap. Electronics experts report that the gap was the result of at least 5 separate erasures. Nixon's secretary, Rose Mary Woods, denies deliberately erasing the tape.

November 17th 1973: During a press conference, Nixon says "I'm not a crook".

Early 1974: There are calls for Nixon to resign and the Congress begins to seriously consider impeachment.

January 1974: TIME Magazine names Watergate Judge John Sirica as Man of the Year.

April 30th 1974: Nixon releases more edited transcripts of tapes. [Click here to read his Address to the Nation.](#) There is public shock at the foul language used by Nixon and the expression "expletive deleted" enters the vocabulary.

July 24th 1974: The Supreme Court orders (8-0) Nixon to release more tapes that were potential evidence in criminal trials of his former subordinates. The case is known as United States v. Nixon.

July 27th-30th: The House of Representatives Judiciary Committee votes (27-11) to recommend that Nixon be impeached on three charges, including obstruction of justice. [Read the text of the Articles of Impeachment and an analysis of the Judiciary Committee's votes.](#)

August 5th 1974: Nixon releases three more tapes that prove he ordered a cover-up of the Watergate burglary on June 23rd 1972, six days after the break-in. The tapes show that he knew of the involvement of White House officials and the Campaign for the Re-election of the President. These tapes become known as the "smoking gun". The eleven Republicans on the Judiciary Committee who voted against impeachment say they will change their votes. It is clear that Nixon

will be impeached and convicted in the Senate.

August 9th 1974: Nixon resigns, the first president ever to do so. [Click here to read his resignation speech.](#) [Click here to view a picture of his resignation letter to the Secretary of State, Dr. Henry Kissinger.](#)

Gerald Ford becomes the 38th president. He nominates Nelson Rockefeller as vice-president. They become the nation's first unelected presidential duo.

8 September 1974: President Ford grants Nixon a "full, free and absolute pardon". [Click here to read Ford's Address to the Nation and Nixon's response to the pardon.](#)

November 1976: Jimmy Carter defeats Ford to become the 39th president.

Casualties & Convictions Resulting from Watergate:

- one presidential resignation
- one vice-presidential resignation
- 40 government officials indicted or jailed
- H.R. Haldeman & John Erlichman (White House staff) resigned 30 April 1973, subsequently jailed
- John Dean (White House legal counsel) sacked 30 April 1973, subsequently jailed
- John Mitchell, Attorney-General and Chairman of the Committee to Re-elect the President (CREEP) jailed
- Howard Hunt and G. Gordon Liddy (ex-White House staff), planned the Watergate break-in, both jailed
- Charles Colson, special counsel to the President jailed
- James McCord (Security Director of CREEP) jailed

Aftermath:

Some commentators attribute the increased level of cynicism about politics to the Watergate affair.

The media becomes more confident and aggressive. Watergate was unraveled by the Washington Post reporters, Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein. Their work led to the development of teams of "investigative" reporters on newspapers around the world. "Deep Throat" became an everyday term, referring to the anonymous official who leaked information to Woodward and Bernstein. An excellent article on the possible identity of "Deep Throat" appears in the Washington Post.

A new wave of Democratic congressmen is elected in 1976 and there are dramatic changes in the composition of committee chairmanships.

Many of Nixon's subordinates are jailed, some discover religion, and others write books.

Political scandals are termed "--gate".

Nixon sets about rehabilitating his reputation, writing books and travelling the world. He dies on April 22nd 1994 at the age of 81.

Read TIME Magazine's report following Nixon's death. Read "I Have Never Been A Quitter", by Otto Friedrich.

Read a biography of Nixon from the Internet Public Library.

Click here to read Richard Nixon's Last Will and Testament.

Download CNN Video of Nixon's Funeral and read Senator Bob Dole's comments at Nixon's funeral, or view a picture of Nixon and Dole.

In 1995, Oliver Stone produces a film called "Nixon", starring Anthony Hopkins as Nixon. The film is condemned by the Nixon family. Earlier, in 1991, Len Colodny and Robert Gettlin produce a book called "Silent Coup - The Removal of a President".

Former Vice-President Spiro Agnew dies on September 17, 1996, in Berlin, Maryland, aged 77. Click here to visit The Wild World of Spiro Agnew.

More of the White House tapes were released in 1996 and 1997. Read a backgrounder about these tapes and a discussion from The News Hour with Jim Lehrer. The Washington Post also discusses the tapes.

Watergate and American Political Values

Watergate provides useful material for analyzing the operation of the President, Congress or Supreme Court. It gives some idea of the interplay between the 3 arms of the American political system and of the political values underpinning the constitutional framework.

Congressional committees (Senate Watergate & House Judiciary) - The operation of these committees demonstrate a fundamental difference between the Australian and American political systems. US congressional committees have much more independence and power than parliamentary committees in Australia. The inquiries undertaken by the Senate Watergate Committee were crucial in securing Nixon's resignation. The recommendation by the Judiciary Committee to impeach the president was carried by the votes of both Democrat and Republican members.

Supreme Court power over the Executive branch - The checks and balances built into the US system were demonstrated by the rulings of the Court that Nixon release the tapes of Oval Office conversations.

Presidential executive power, and the White House office - Nixon claimed "executive privilege" for the White House tapes and other documents. His personal staff, particularly Haldeman and Erlichman, demonstrate the power that the White House office can exercise. Unlike Cabinet appointments, these positions are not subject to Senate confirmation.

Separation of powers - No member of any of the 3 arms of the US government may belong to any of the other arms.

Checks and balances - The Watergate scandal demonstrates the complex web of safeguards built into the American Constitution. On the one hand, the President is the Head of Government, but does not control the Legislature. Unlike a Westminster Prime Minister, the President cannot dissolve Congress. Whilst the President may nominate members of the Judicial arm, they require Senate approval. Similarly, the President serves a fixed 4-year term and may only be removed following an impeachment process that must begin in the House of Representatives. The President may only be removed from office by the Senate.

Values of accountability and responsibility - the removal of Richard Nixon demonstrates an array of accountability processes. Whilst serving a fixed term of office, the President is accountable to the House of Representatives, the chamber that most directly reflects the most recent opinion of the nation. However, in keeping with the Federalist values of the Founding Fathers, it is only the Senate, where each state, regardless of population, is represented by two Senators, which may remove the President.

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