

Watergate was not simply a burglary that forced a president to resign. The burglary was the opening through which the country discovered a much larger system of political spying, illegal campaign activity, obstruction of justice and presidential abuse of power. President Richard Nixon was not proven to have ordered the original break-in, but he participated in the effort to hide his administration's connection to it. His own secret recordings eventually exposed him.

The scandal began in the early morning hours of June 17, 1972, at the Watergate complex in Washington, D.C. The complex included apartments, offices and a hotel. The Democratic National Committee maintained its headquarters there. Five men entered the Democratic offices carrying cameras, electronic listening equipment, tear-gas devices and large amounts of cash.

The men were not ordinary burglars looking for money, jewelry or office equipment. They were attempting to photograph documents and install or repair electronic bugs that could secretly transmit conversations. Four had connections to anti-Castro Cuban operations, and some had worked with the Central Intelligence Agency. The fifth, James McCord, was a former CIA and FBI employee who worked as security coordinator for President Nixon's reelection organization.

Nixon's official campaign organization was called the Committee for the Re-Election of the President. Its abbreviation, CRP, was mocked as CREEP after the scandal unfolded. McCord's position created an immediate connection between the burglars and the president's campaign, although the full chain of responsibility was not yet known.

The burglars had entered the Democratic offices before. During an earlier operation in May 1972, they photographed documents and planted listening devices. At least one bug did not work properly, and the information they obtained was considered unsatisfactory. They returned in June to repair equipment and collect additional intelligence.

Why Nixon's campaign wanted this information has never been answered with complete certainty. One objective appears to have been gathering information from the office of Democratic National Committee chairman Lawrence O'Brien. The operation may also have sought political strategy, financial information or evidence involving prominent donors. The uncertainty itself shows how reckless the operation was. People close to a president approved an illegal entry without even producing a clear political benefit.

The operation fell apart because of small mistakes. A member of the burglary team placed tape over door latches so doors would not lock. Watergate security guard Frank Wills noticed the tape and removed it. When he later returned and discovered that a door had been taped again, he realized someone was deliberately trying to keep it unlocked.

Wills called the police. Plainclothes officers arrived in an unmarked vehicle, so a lookout stationed across the street did not immediately recognize them as police. The officers

searched the Democratic offices and arrested the five burglars. What had been planned as a secret intelligence operation became a public criminal case.

Frank Wills was twenty-four years old and earning a modest wage as a security guard. His attention exposed a conspiracy reaching the White House. Yet Wills did not become wealthy or secure because of his role. He struggled financially in later life. Watergate produced book deals, reporting careers, political fame and movies for others, while the working man whose careful observation stopped the burglary received relatively little lasting benefit.

Police found money on the burglars in consecutively numbered hundred-dollar bills. Investigators could follow bank records and determine where the money had traveled. Some of the funds were connected to Nixon's reelection operation and campaign donations that had been moved through financial channels intended to hide their origin.

The money mattered because political conspirators can deny conversations, destroy notes and claim they have never met one another. Financial records are harder to explain away. A bank deposit, check or numbered bill can connect people who insist there is no connection.

Two other men were central to planning the burglary: G. Gordon Liddy and E. Howard Hunt. Liddy had worked for the FBI and Nixon's campaign organization. Hunt was a former CIA officer who had participated in covert operations. Both men believed political opponents could be treated like enemies in an intelligence war.

Liddy developed a group of proposals for spying, disruption and political sabotage. Some versions included kidnapping protesters, using prostitutes to compromise political opponents, secretly recording people and carrying out additional break-ins. Even Nixon campaign officials who were willing to approve illegal activity considered parts of Liddy's original plan too extreme or expensive.

The Watergate operation grew out of a larger culture inside the Nixon administration. The White House was obsessed with leaks, political enemies and the belief that hostile forces were trying to destroy the president. Nixon and his closest advisers did not treat every opponent as a citizen with a different political view. They frequently viewed critics, journalists, activists and government employees as threats to be monitored, punished or discredited.

This culture became more aggressive after the Pentagon Papers were leaked in 1971. The Pentagon Papers were a classified history of United States decision-making in Vietnam. Defense analyst Daniel Ellsberg provided copies to newspapers because he believed the public had been deceived about the war.

The study concerned decisions made largely before Nixon became president, but Nixon feared that allowing the leak to go unpunished would encourage people to release

secrets about his administration. The White House created a secret investigative group known as the Plumbers because its members were supposed to stop leaks.

The Plumbers went beyond legitimate investigation. Hunt and Liddy organized a break-in at the office of Ellsberg's psychiatrist, Dr. Lewis Fielding, hoping to find information that could be used against Ellsberg. Breaking into a psychiatrist's office to steal private records was not national security. It was an effort to destroy a critic by finding personal material.

The administration also developed an enemies list containing politicians, journalists, activists, businesspeople and celebrities considered hostile to Nixon. Officials discussed using federal power against opponents, including tax investigations and other forms of pressure. Government agencies meant to serve the public were being considered as weapons for personal and political revenge.

Watergate was therefore not one strange event carried out by overexcited campaign workers. It came from an environment in which secrecy, sabotage and illegal intelligence gathering were increasingly accepted. The burglars were caught, but the attitude that produced the burglary existed much closer to the president.

Nixon was running for reelection in 1972 and was heavily favored to win. His Democratic opponent would eventually be Senator George McGovern, whose campaign struggled badly. Nixon did not need a burglary to survive a close election. He went on to win forty-nine states and more than sixty percent of the popular vote.

That makes the operation appear even more senseless, but overwhelming power does not always make people feel secure. Nixon carried deep resentment toward political opponents, members of the press, wealthy Eastern institutions and people he believed looked down on him. He had risen from a relatively modest background through intense work and political struggle. Success did not remove his insecurity. In some ways, power gave his suspicions more people and institutions to control.

The first White House response to the arrests was denial and separation. Nixon's campaign tried to present the break-in as an operation carried out by individuals acting without authorization from higher officials. White House press secretary Ron Ziegler dismissed the event as a "third-rate burglary."

If the administration had allowed investigators to follow the evidence, the scandal might have remained damaging but survivable for Nixon. The president could have fired officials, released records and condemned the operation. Instead, the White House began working to contain the investigation.

This is why Watergate is often explained through the statement that the cover-up was worse than the crime. That statement does not mean the burglary was unimportant. It means the president's involvement in obstruction created a constitutional crisis. A crime committed by campaign workers became an abuse of presidential power when Nixon and

his advisers tried to block investigators, influence witnesses, arrange secret payments and conceal evidence.

Money was raised to keep the burglars and planners quiet. These payments were often called hush money because they were intended to encourage silence. There were discussions about clemency, meaning possible presidential mercy or reduced punishment. Defendants were pressured to accept blame without revealing the involvement of higher officials.

The administration also tried to interfere with the FBI investigation. White House officials planned to have the CIA tell the FBI that further investigation of certain money trails could interfere with national-security operations. The national-security claim was largely a pretext. The real purpose was to prevent the FBI from reaching people connected to Nixon's campaign.

On June 23, 1972, only six days after the arrests, Nixon discussed this plan with his chief of staff, H. R. Haldeman. Nixon suggested that CIA officials tell the FBI to stay away from parts of the investigation. That conversation was secretly recorded by Nixon's own White House taping system. It later became known as the smoking-gun tape because it proved that Nixon had joined the obstruction effort much earlier than he publicly admitted.

The public did not know about that tape in 1972. Nixon's administration managed to keep the full scandal from exploding before Election Day. The president defeated McGovern in one of the largest electoral landslides in American history. Watergate existed during the campaign, but most voters did not yet understand its size or how close it reached to Nixon.

Two young reporters at *The Washington Post*, Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, continued investigating. They followed financial records, spoke with government employees and campaign workers, and slowly connected the burglary to Nixon's reelection organization and the White House.

Woodward received secret guidance from a source known for decades as Deep Throat. In 2005 the source was publicly identified as Mark Felt, a high-ranking FBI official. Felt helped confirm information and direct Woodward toward useful areas, but he did not hand the reporters the entire scandal in one package.

The famous phrase "follow the money" became closely associated with Watergate, especially after the movie *All the President's Men*. The exact phrase is more closely tied to the dramatized version than to the reporters' original conversations with Felt. The principle, however, was accurate. Tracing campaign money helped reveal connections that public denials tried to hide.

Woodward and Bernstein deserve credit for persistence, but the press did not defeat Nixon alone. Police officers made the arrests. FBI agents conducted investigations. Prosecutors developed cases. Federal Judge John Sirica pressured defendants to tell the

truth. Congressional committees held hearings. White House insiders eventually testified. The Supreme Court ordered Nixon to release evidence.

Turning Watergate into a story about two heroic reporters defeating a corrupt president makes the history exciting but incomplete. The scandal was uncovered through multiple institutions performing different parts of their duties. It demonstrates why independent courts, a free press, professional investigators and congressional oversight all matter.

In January 1973, the Watergate burglars and planners went on trial before Judge Sirica. Several pleaded guilty. James McCord and G. Gordon Liddy were convicted. Sirica suspected that higher officials were involved and that the defendants were concealing information.

In March, McCord sent Sirica a letter stating that defendants had been pressured to remain silent and plead guilty. He indicated that perjury had occurred and that higher officials were involved. The letter broke the cover-up open because a participant was now telling the court that the visible defendants were only part of the conspiracy.

The Senate created a special committee to investigate the 1972 presidential campaign. Senator Sam Ervin of North Carolina chaired the committee. Televised hearings began in May 1973 and drew a massive audience. Americans watched former administration officials describe campaign sabotage, hush money and efforts to control the investigation.

One of the most important witnesses was John Dean, the White House counsel. Dean had participated in parts of the cover-up but began cooperating with investigators when he realized he might be made the person responsible for everything. He testified that he had warned Nixon of a “cancer on the presidency” and described conversations suggesting that the president knew about the cover-up.

Dean’s testimony placed Nixon personally inside the scandal, but it initially came down to one man’s word against the president’s. Nixon could claim that Dean was lying to protect himself. The case needed independent evidence.

That evidence existed because Nixon had created a secret taping system inside the White House. Conversations in the Oval Office and other locations were automatically recorded. Nixon did not need to press a button each time. The system captured discussions with advisers, visitors and officials.

Presidents before Nixon had recorded some conversations, but Nixon’s system was broad and automatic. He wanted an accurate record of his presidency, perhaps for future memoirs and historical control. He also preferred private conversations in which advisers spoke freely. The system that was supposed to preserve his version of history ended up preserving evidence against him.

Alexander Butterfield, a former White House aide, revealed the taping system during Senate questioning in July 1973. His answer transformed the investigation. If tapes existed, investigators no longer had to rely only on conflicting memories. They could hear what Nixon and his advisers had actually said.

The Senate committee and special prosecutor Archibald Cox demanded relevant recordings. Nixon refused to provide them, claiming executive privilege. Executive privilege is the principle that presidents need some confidentiality when receiving advice and conducting government business. Without confidentiality, advisers might be afraid to speak honestly.

Executive privilege is not supposed to become a shield for criminal activity. The question was whether a president could withhold evidence needed in a criminal investigation merely by declaring the conversations private. If the answer were yes, a president could participate in illegal conduct inside the White House and then prevent courts from obtaining the evidence.

Nixon proposed a compromise involving Senator John Stennis, who would listen to the tapes and provide summaries. Stennis was elderly and had difficulty hearing, making the proposal seem especially weak. Cox rejected it because a summary chosen through a process controlled by the president was not the same as the original evidence.

On October 20, 1973, Nixon ordered Attorney General Elliot Richardson to fire Cox. Richardson had promised Congress that he would protect the special prosecutor's independence, so he resigned instead. Nixon then ordered Deputy Attorney General William French Smith to fire Cox. Smith also refused and left office.

Solicitor General Robert Bork became acting attorney general and carried out the order. Cox was fired. The event became known as the Saturday Night Massacre. The word massacre was symbolic; nobody was physically killed. The term described the sudden removal or resignation of top Justice Department officials as the president tried to stop a lawful investigation.

The public response was enormous. Members of Congress received demands for impeachment. Nixon had attempted to protect himself by removing the prosecutor, but the action made him appear more guilty and more dangerous. It showed the danger of allowing a president to control the officials responsible for investigating him.

Nixon eventually agreed to release some materials, but the tape controversy continued. One recording contained a gap of about eighteen and a half minutes. Nixon's secretary, Rose Mary Woods, said she might have accidentally erased several minutes while transcribing the tape, demonstrating a position that became mockingly known as the Rose Mary Stretch.

Experts concluded that the full gap involved several separate erasures, making a single accidental mistake difficult to accept. Exactly what had been recorded during the missing

section has never been established. The gap increased suspicion because an administration accused of destroying evidence had produced a tape with a large missing conversation.

In November 1973, while defending himself during a televised appearance, Nixon said, “I am not a crook.” The statement became one of the most famous lines of his presidency. Presidents rarely need to announce that they are not criminals. The fact that Nixon felt compelled to say it showed how deeply Watergate had damaged his credibility.

Nixon’s defenders argued that investigations were being driven by hostile Democrats, liberal journalists and members of the establishment who had always disliked him. Nixon had genuine political enemies, and parts of the press were hostile to him. Neither fact made the evidence disappear. Being disliked does not make a person innocent, just as being popular does not make a person guilty.

The legal fight over the tapes reached the Supreme Court in *United States v. Nixon*. On July 24, 1974, the Court unanimously ordered Nixon to provide the recordings needed for the criminal case. Justice William Rehnquist did not participate because he had served in Nixon’s Justice Department, leaving eight justices to decide.

The Court recognized that presidents possess a legitimate need for confidential communications, but it rejected an unlimited privilege. Nixon could not use a general claim of confidentiality to withhold evidence in a criminal proceeding. The ruling established that the president was not completely beyond judicial process.

The decision was especially powerful because several justices had been appointed by Nixon. They did not owe him personal protection merely because he had selected them. Judicial independence required them to apply the Constitution even when the outcome threatened the president responsible for their appointments.

The House Judiciary Committee was already considering impeachment. Impeachment is not the same as removal from office. The House of Representatives approves articles of impeachment, which function somewhat like formal charges. The Senate then holds a trial and decides whether the official should be removed.

The committee approved three articles of impeachment against Nixon. The first concerned obstruction of justice, including efforts to interfere with the investigation, conceal evidence and encourage silence. The second concerned abuse of power, including misuse of federal agencies against political opponents. The third concerned contempt of Congress for refusing to comply with lawful subpoenas.

The articles did not focus only on the burglary. They addressed the constitutional danger of a president using government authority to protect himself. A private individual covering up a crime commits obstruction. A president covering up a crime can also bend federal agencies, national-security claims and executive privilege toward that purpose.

On August 5, 1974, the White House released the smoking-gun recording from June 23, 1972. The conversation showed Nixon participating in the plan to use the CIA to limit the FBI investigation. It destroyed his repeated claim that he had learned of the cover-up much later.

Even many Republicans who had defended Nixon could no longer continue. Congressional leaders visited the White House and explained that he lacked enough support to avoid impeachment in the House or conviction in the Senate. Nixon faced a choice between resigning and almost certainly being removed.

On the evening of August 8, Nixon announced that he would resign. His resignation became effective the next day, August 9, 1974. He was the first and remains the only United States president to resign from office.

Nixon did not deliver a complete confession. He acknowledged that he had lost the political support needed to govern and admitted that some judgments had been wrong, but he did not openly explain the full cover-up or accept every accusation. His resignation prevented a Senate impeachment trial that could have created a more complete official judgment.

Vice President Gerald Ford became president. Ford had not been elected president or vice president by the national electorate. Nixon's original vice president, Spiro Agnew, had resigned in 1973 after being accused of bribery and tax offenses unrelated to Watergate. Nixon appointed Ford under the Twenty-Fifth Amendment, and Congress confirmed him.

On September 8, 1974, Ford granted Nixon a full and unconditional pardon for any federal crimes Nixon had committed or might have committed during his presidency. Because of the pardon, Nixon never faced a criminal trial over Watergate.

Ford argued that the country needed to move beyond the scandal and that a long criminal case against a former president would keep the nation divided. Critics believed the pardon placed the president above ordinary justice. If a poor person could be prosecuted for obstruction or burglary, why should a former president be spared because a trial would be uncomfortable?

Some people suspected a secret agreement in which Nixon would resign and Ford would pardon him. No such bargain was proven. Ford's decision may have been motivated by a genuine desire to end the national crisis, but good intentions do not remove the problem of unequal accountability. The pardon helped Nixon personally while denying the public a criminal trial that could have tested the evidence.

Ford's popularity suffered, and the pardon probably contributed to his defeat by Jimmy Carter in the 1976 presidential election. Years later, some historians became more sympathetic to Ford's decision, viewing it as an attempt to stabilize the country. The

disagreement remains because mercy and accountability can point in different directions.

Dozens of officials and participants were charged, convicted or imprisoned for Watergate-related crimes and other illegal activities. John Mitchell, Nixon's former attorney general and later head of the reelection campaign, became the first former United States attorney general to serve time in prison. Haldeman, John Ehrlichman, John Dean, Charles Colson, Liddy, Hunt and others faced criminal consequences.

The scandal changed the language of American politics. Later scandals were given names ending in "-gate," even when they had nothing to do with burglary, surveillance or presidential obstruction. The suffix became shorthand for controversy. That habit can weaken the meaning of Watergate because every embarrassment is not a constitutional crisis.

Watergate's central issue was not that politicians lied. Politicians have lied throughout history. It was that people around the president committed crimes, and presidential power was used to frustrate the investigation. Federal agencies, campaign money, executive privilege and national-security claims were manipulated to protect the people controlling the government.

The scandal produced reforms intended to control campaign money, strengthen government ethics and increase congressional oversight. Amendments to federal campaign laws placed new restrictions on political contributions and spending and created the Federal Election Commission. Financial disclosure rules and independent-investigation procedures were later strengthened.

Some reforms were weakened, changed or struck down over time. Money continued to find new routes into politics through political action committees, nonprofit organizations and outside spending groups. Watergate proved that regulation can close one channel while political professionals search for another.

Public trust in government fell sharply. Vietnam had already caused many Americans to doubt official statements. Watergate provided evidence that a president and his closest advisers could repeatedly lie while presenting themselves as defenders of law and national security. Suspicion of government became a permanent part of American political culture.

Some skepticism is healthy. Citizens should not accept every official statement simply because it comes from a president, general, intelligence agency or police department. Watergate showed the need for evidence, oversight and independent institutions.

Constant cynicism can also become dangerous. If people conclude that every official is equally corrupt and every fact is merely propaganda, wrongdoing becomes harder to punish. Nixon's actions were exposed because investigators, judges, witnesses,

legislators and journalists believed evidence mattered. Watergate should teach careful skepticism, not the belief that truth is impossible.

The scandal also revealed the strength of the constitutional system. The president tried to block an investigation, but the courts rejected an unlimited claim of executive privilege. Congress investigated and moved toward impeachment. Members of Nixon's own party eventually accepted the evidence. The military did not intervene, and power transferred peacefully to Ford.

That outcome was not automatic. Institutions work only when people inside them are willing to perform their responsibilities. Attorney General Richardson could have fired Cox and protected his position, but he resigned. Judge Sirica could have accepted the burglary as an isolated crime, but he continued asking who was above the burglars. Republican members of Congress could have treated party loyalty as more important than evidence, but enough eventually refused.

Watergate also exposes the limits of relying on personal character alone. The American system does not assume every president will be honest. It divides power because ambitious and frightened people may abuse it. A written Constitution is not enough if Congress refuses oversight, courts refuse independence or law-enforcement agencies become servants of one leader.

Nixon was not an unintelligent or completely ineffective president. His administration opened relations with the People's Republic of China, pursued arms-control agreements with the Soviet Union, created the Environmental Protection Agency and signed important environmental laws. He understood international politics and worked relentlessly.

Those achievements make Watergate more instructive. Abuse of power is not committed only by foolish people who accomplish nothing. A president can make important policy decisions and still attack democratic government. Intelligence does not prevent corruption. It can give a corrupt or frightened person better tools for hiding misconduct.

Nixon's greatest weakness may have been that victory never made him feel safe. He had reached the presidency, won reelection overwhelmingly and held enormous authority, but he remained consumed by enemies. He allowed loyalty to become more important than legality and secrecy to become more important than judgment.

The people around him also failed. Some carried out illegal orders. Others told themselves they were protecting the presidency when they were protecting the president from accountability. A position inside the White House can make an ordinary crime feel like a patriotic duty if everyone around the table uses phrases such as national security and executive privilege.

Real loyalty to a leader does not mean hiding every mistake. An adviser who prevents a president from committing a crime is more loyal than one who quietly arranges the

payment. Nixon surrounded himself with people who often treated his political survival as the nation's survival. Once those became the same thing in their minds, almost any action could be justified.

Watergate began with tape placed over a door latch. It ended with the Supreme Court limiting presidential privilege, Congress preparing to impeach the president and Nixon boarding a helicopter after resigning. The distance between those moments was filled with thousands of decisions. People decided to spy, pay, lie, investigate, testify, resign, issue subpoenas and follow evidence.

The burglary could have remained a small crime if the people above it had accepted responsibility. Instead, fear of exposure produced more misconduct, and each attempt to conceal the previous act created another piece of evidence. The cover-up did not protect Nixon's presidency. It slowly converted a campaign scandal into the destruction of his presidency.

That is the lasting meaning of Watergate. Government officials cannot be allowed to decide that protecting their power is the same as protecting the country. A president has access to information, agencies, lawyers and executive authority that ordinary citizens do not possess. Those advantages create a greater duty to obey the law, not a private exemption from it.

Richard Nixon won forty-nine states and still lost the presidency because electoral victory could not erase obstruction of justice. He was not removed by an opposing army or defeated at the ballot box. His own recorded words proved that he had used presidential power against a lawful investigation. Watergate showed that the strongest evidence against a powerful person may come from the system that person created to preserve his own greatness.