

# Watergate scandal

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**Watergate** was a major political scandal that occurred in the United States in the 1970s, following a break-in at the Democratic National Committee (DNC) headquarters at the Watergate office complex in Washington, D.C. in 1972 and President Richard Nixon's administration's attempted cover-up of its involvement. When the conspiracy was discovered and investigated by the U.S. Congress, the Nixon administration's resistance to its probes led to a constitutional crisis.<sup>[1]</sup>

The term *Watergate* has come to encompass an array of clandestine and often illegal activities undertaken by members of the Nixon administration. Those activities included such "dirty tricks" as bugging the offices of political opponents and people of whom Nixon or his officials were suspicious. Nixon and his close aides also ordered investigations of activist groups and political figures, using the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), and the Internal Revenue Service (IRS).

The scandal led to the discovery of multiple abuses of power by the Nixon administration, an impeachment process against the president that led to articles of impeachment,<sup>[2]</sup> and the resignation of Nixon. The scandal also resulted in the indictment of 69 people, with trials or pleas resulting in 48 being found guilty, many of whom were Nixon's top administration officials.<sup>[3]</sup>

The affair began with the arrest of five men for breaking and entering into the DNC headquarters at the Watergate complex on Saturday, June 17, 1972. The FBI investigated and discovered a connection between cash found on the burglars and a slush fund used by the Committee for the Re-Election of the President (CRP), the official organization of Nixon's campaign.<sup>[4][5]</sup> In July 1973, evidence mounted against the President's staff, including testimony provided by former staff members in an investigation conducted by the Senate Watergate Committee. The investigation revealed that President Nixon had a tape-recording system in his offices and that he had recorded many conversations.<sup>[6][7]</sup>

After a protracted series of bitter court battles, the U.S. Supreme Court unanimously ruled that the president was obligated to release the tapes to government investigators, and he eventually complied. These audio recordings implicated the president, revealing he had attempted to cover up activities that took place after the break-in and to use federal officials to deflect the investigation.<sup>[5][8]</sup> Facing virtually certain impeachment in the House of Representatives and equally certain conviction by the Senate, Nixon resigned the presidency on August 9, 1974.<sup>[9][10]</sup> On September 8, 1974, his successor, Gerald Ford, pardoned him.

The name "Watergate" and the suffix "-gate" have since become synonymous with political scandals in the United States.<sup>[11][12][13][14][15]</sup>

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On September 29, 1972, the press reported that John Mitchell, while serving as Attorney General, controlled a secret Republican fund used to finance intelligence-gathering against the Democrats. On October 10, the FBI reported the Watergate break-in was part of a massive campaign of political spying and sabotage on behalf of the Nixon re-election committee. Despite these revelations, Nixon's campaign was never seriously jeopardized; on November 7, the President was re-elected in one of the biggest landslides in American political history.

## Role of the media

The connection between the break-in and the re-election committee was highlighted by media coverage—in particular, investigative coverage by *The Washington Post*, *Time*, and *The New York Times*. The coverage dramatically increased publicity and consequent political repercussions. Relying heavily upon anonymous sources, *Post* reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein uncovered information suggesting that knowledge of the break-in and attempts to cover it up, led deeply into the upper reaches of the Justice Department, FBI, CIA, and the White House. Woodward and Bernstein interviewed Judy Hoback Miller, the bookkeeper for Nixon, who revealed to them information about the mishandling of funds and records being destroyed.<sup>[30]</sup>

Chief among the *Post's* anonymous sources was an individual whom Woodward and Bernstein had nicknamed Deep Throat; 33 years later, in 2005, the informant was identified as William Mark Felt, Sr., deputy director of the FBI during that period of the 1970s, something Woodward later confirmed. Felt met secretly with Woodward several times, telling him of Howard Hunt's involvement with the Watergate break-in, and that the White House staff regarded the stakes in Watergate extremely high. Felt warned Woodward that the FBI wanted to know where he and other reporters were getting their information, as they were uncovering a wider web of crimes than the FBI first disclosed. All of the secret meetings between Woodward and "Deep Throat" (W. Mark Felt) took place at an underground parking garage somewhere in Rosslyn over a period from June 1972 to January 1973. Prior to resigning from the FBI on June 22, 1973, Felt also anonymously planted leaks about Watergate to *Time* magazine, the *Washington Daily News* and other publications.<sup>[31]</sup>

During this early period, most of the media failed to grasp the full implications of the scandal, and concentrated reporting on other topics related to the 1972 presidential election.<sup>[32]</sup> After the reporting that one of the convicted burglars wrote to Judge Sirica alleging a high-level cover-up, the media shifted its focus. *Time* magazine described Nixon as undergoing "daily hell and very little trust." The distrust between the press and the Nixon administration was mutual and greater than usual due to lingering dissatisfaction with events from the Vietnam War. At the same time, public distrust of the media was polled at more than 40%.<sup>[32]</sup>

Nixon and top administration officials discussed using government agencies to "get" (or retaliate against) those they perceived as hostile media organizations.<sup>[32]</sup> The discussions had precedent. At the request of Nixon's White House in 1969, the FBI tapped the phones of five reporters. In 1971, the White House requested an audit of the tax return of the editor of *Newsday*, after he wrote a series of articles about the financial dealings of Charles Rebozo, a friend of Nixon.<sup>[33]</sup>

The Administration and its supporters accused the media of making "wild accusations," putting too much emphasis on the story, and of having a liberal bias against the Administration.<sup>[32]</sup> Nixon said in a May 1974 interview with supporter Baruch Korff that if he had followed the liberal policies that he thought the media preferred, "Watergate would have been a blip."<sup>[34]</sup> The media noted that most of the reporting turned out to be accurate; the competitive nature of the media guaranteed widespread coverage of the far-reaching political scandal.<sup>[32]</sup> Applications to journalism schools reached an all-time high in 1974.<sup>[32]</sup> ]

## Scandal escalates

Rather than ending with the conviction and sentencing to prison of the five Watergate burglars on January 30, 1973, the investigation into the break-in and the Nixon Administration's involvement grew broader. Nixon's conversation in late March and all of April 1973 revealed that not only did he know he needed to remove Haldeman, Ehrlichman, and Dean to gain distance from them, but he had to do so in a way that was least likely to incriminate him and his presidency. Nixon created a new conspiracy—to effect a cover-up of the cover-up—which began in late March 1973.



The morning that his resignation took effect, the President, with Mrs. Nixon and their family, said farewell to the White House staff in the East Room.<sup>[72]</sup> A helicopter carried them from the White House to Andrews Air Force Base in Maryland. Nixon later wrote that he thought, "As the helicopter moved on to Andrews, I found myself thinking not of the past, but of the future. What could I do now?" At Andrews, he and his family boarded Air Force One to El Toro Marine Corps Air Station in California, and then were transported to his home La Casa Pacifica in San Clemente.

## President Ford's pardon of Nixon

With President Nixon's resignation, Congress dropped its impeachment proceedings. Criminal prosecution was still a possibility both on the federal and state level.<sup>[48]</sup> Nixon was succeeded by Vice President Gerald Ford as President, who on September 8, 1974, issued a full and unconditional pardon of Nixon, immunizing him from prosecution for any crimes he had

"committed or may have committed or taken part in" as president.<sup>[73]</sup> In a televised broadcast to the nation, Ford explained that he felt the pardon was in the best interest of the country. He said that the Nixon family's situation "is an American tragedy in which we all have played a part. It could go on and on and on, or someone must write the end to it. I have concluded that only I can do that, and if I can, I must."<sup>[74]</sup>

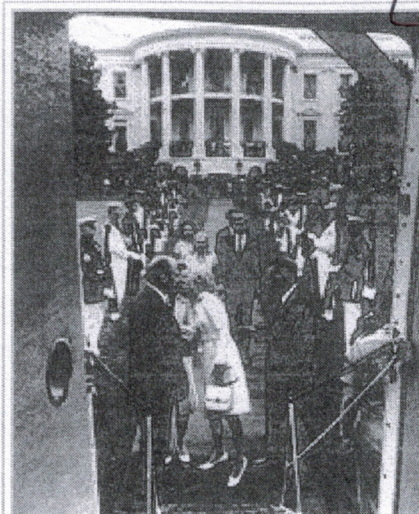
Nixon proclaimed his innocence until his death in 1994. In his official response to the pardon, he said that he "was wrong in not acting more decisively and more forthrightly in dealing with Watergate, particularly when it reached the stage of judicial proceedings and grew from a political scandal into a national tragedy".<sup>[75]</sup>

Some commentators have argued that pardoning Nixon contributed to President Ford's loss of the presidential election of 1976.<sup>[76]</sup> Allegations of a secret deal made with Ford, promising a pardon in return for Nixon's resignation, led Ford to testify before the House Judiciary Committee on October 17, 1974.<sup>[77][78]</sup>

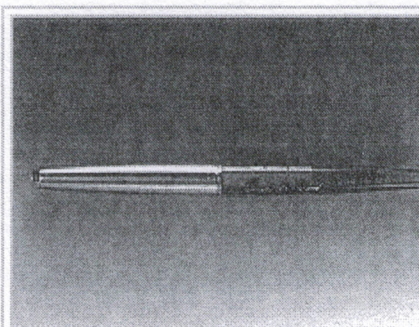
In his autobiography *A Time to Heal*, Ford wrote about a meeting he had with Nixon's Chief of Staff, Alexander Haig. Haig was explaining what he and Nixon's staff thought were Nixon's only options. He could try to ride out the impeachment and fight against conviction in the Senate all the way, or he could resign. His options for resigning were to delay his resignation until further along in the impeachment process to try and settle for a censure vote in Congress, or to pardon himself and then resign. Haig told Ford that some of Nixon's staff suggested that Nixon could agree to resign in return for an agreement that Ford would pardon him.

Haig emphasized that these weren't *his* suggestions. He didn't identify the staff members and he made it very clear that he wasn't recommending any one option over another. What he wanted to know was whether or not my overall assessment of the situation agreed with his. [emphasis in original] ... Next he asked if I had any suggestions as to courses of actions for the President. I didn't think it would be proper for me to make any recommendations at all, and I told him so.

—Gerald Ford, *A Time to Heal*<sup>[79]</sup>



Oliver F. Atkins' photo of Nixon leaving the White House shortly before his resignation became effective, August 9, 1974



Pen used by President Gerald R. Ford to pardon Richard Nixon on September 8, 1974



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