

The crisis in Washington: what history tells us, Part One

Watergate

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The following is the first article in a three-part series outlining the most important political crises of the 1970s and 1980s, the Watergate and Iran-Contra affairs, and the profound abuses of presidential power which they involved. The final article contrasts these earlier scandals with the political offensive against the Clinton administration spearheaded by Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr.

Anyone seeking to understand the real significance of the current Washington crisis will gain little from the coverage provided by the American media. On the rare occasions when news reports go beyond scandal-mongering or speculation about the personal fate of Clinton, what passes for analysis often consists of superficial references to previous political scandals.

Official Washington, and here we must include the lavishly paid press and television commentators as well as the Democratic and Republican politicians, seems gripped by a mental lethargy that makes a fresh analysis of political events impossible. Placing unfolding events within a historical perspective is reduced to imposing the template of Watergate—the crisis that drove Richard Nixon from office in 1974—on each new eruption of scandal in the capital. The very terminology—“cover-up,” “leaks,” “stonewalling,” even the ubiquitous and mind-numbing attachment of the suffix “-gate” to every inquiry into political misconduct—dates back to the events of 25 years ago.

There is much to be learned from comparing—and contrasting—the current scandal to Watergate and to the Iran-Contra affair of 1986-87, which staggered the Reagan administration. But to do so intelligently requires both a serious study of history and an effort to probe beneath the surface of events to grasp their underlying social roots. Both are sadly lacking in what passes for political commentary today.

In sharp contrast to the scandal-mongering attacks on Clinton, from Whitewater to Lewinsky, Watergate was not a matter of financial corruption or private conduct. It involved the systematic abuse of power for political motives and culminated in a major constitutional crisis.

“Watergate” means much more than the break-in at Democratic National Committee headquarters, located in the Watergate apartment complex in Washington, DC, on June 17, 1972, and the subsequent efforts of the Nixon administration to cover up the involvement of top White House officials. It involved great issues of foreign policy and democratic rights, brought to a head by the shattering defeat of American imperialism in Vietnam. And it revealed tendencies toward dictatorial methods of rule which reappeared even more powerfully in the Iran-Contra affair.

The creation of the “plumbers”

Richard Nixon took office in January 1969, after his narrow election victory over Democrat Hubert Humphrey and right-wing independent George Wallace, determined to avoid the fate of Lyndon Johnson, whose administration was shipwrecked by the Vietnam War. Nixon sought to deal with the growing domestic opposition to the war by applying both the carrot and the stick: publicly, he announced a policy of “Vietnamization” of war, which would shift the burden of the ground combat, and hence casualties, from American to South Vietnamese forces; in secret, he ordered stepped-up police harassment and repression of the antiwar protest movement.

A key element of this crackdown was intensified surveillance of the federal bureaucracy itself, spying on those officials whom Nixon believed to be opposed to his policies or linked to the protest movement. In May 1969, when the *New York Times* published a brief article about the secret US bombing of portions of Cambodia bordering on South Vietnam, the White House ordered wiretaps on reporters and Pentagon officials to try to determine the source of the “leak.”

This action, whose illegality was excused on the grounds of “national security,” was endorsed by Secretary of State William Rogers, Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird, National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger, and Kissinger’s top aide, General Alexander Haig, as well as a high-ranking official of the Justice Department, William Rehnquist, now Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. It was the first of 17 illegal wiretapping efforts by the Nixon administration.

The struggle against leaks was systematized through the formation of a secret unit of former CIA operatives, working out of the White House itself, who were referred to as the “plumbers.” Throughout 1971 this special intelligence unit, established without any congressional authorization or legal basis, was preoccupied with the case of Daniel Ellsberg, a Defense Department official who had helped draft the Pentagon’s secret history of how the United States became involved in the war in Vietnam. This chronology directly contradicted the claims of the Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon administrations, who portrayed the war as the outcome of the unprovoked invasion of South Vietnam by North Vietnam in 1959-60.

The “Pentagon Papers,” as they came to be known, detailed the origins of the Vietnam War in the revolutionary struggle carried out by the Viet Minh against French colonialism, culminating in their victory at Dien Bien Phu. The Pentagon history acknowledged that the United States had refused to carry out the provisions of the 1954 Geneva Accord calling for nationwide free elections because the Eisenhower administration was convinced that Ho Chi Minh would win such a vote. Instead, Washington created a new government in the southern half of the country, under the dictatorship of the family of Ngo Dinh Diem, a ruler so corrupt and ineffective that he was overthrown and murdered by his own generals in

1963, with the tacit approval of the Kennedy administration.

Ellsberg leaked this massive document to the *New York Times*, which began serializing excerpts in June 1971 after the Supreme Court rejected a White House effort to suppress the material on national security grounds. The Nixon administration pressed ahead with a federal prosecution of Ellsberg for the theft of government secrets. On September 3, 1971 several members of the “plumbers” unit broke into the offices of Ellsberg’s psychiatrist looking for information which might discredit him. Four days later a report on this unsuccessful burglary was given to Nixon in the White House. During the same period Nixon gave orders for other burglaries, targeting the Brookings Institution and even the National Archives.

Break-in and cover-up

With the onset of the 1972 presidential election campaign, Nixon’s focus shifted to his Democratic Party opponents. He ordered surveillance of Senator Edward Kennedy, an IRS audit of Democratic Party Chairman Larry O’Brien and others on his list of political enemies, as well as “dirty tricks” operations against virtually every Democratic presidential hopeful. Two members of the White House “plumbers,” former CIA agents E. Howard Hunt and G. Gordon Liddy, transferred to the staff of the Committee to Re-elect the President, where they devised and carried out a plan to install a listening device in O’Brien’s office.

When the bug failed to operate properly, Hunt ordered the CRP’s security chief, another ex-CIA agent named James McCord, to reenter the Watergate complex and install a new device. McCord and four accomplices, all Cuban exiles and veterans of the Bay of Pigs invasion, were arrested after a security guard called the Washington police. Hunt’s name and White House phone number were found on one of the men, and Hunt and Liddy were soon arrested and charged as well.

The cover-up began as soon as the White House learned of the arrests. Nixon was concerned that Hunt and Liddy would expose the White House “plumbers” and that the resulting scandal might jeopardize his reelection campaign. Nixon’s two top aides, Bob Haldeman and John Ehrlichman, swung into action to limit the damage and make sure that the Watergate burglars said nothing about the higher-level officials who had ordered the break-in or their own involvement in other acts of political espionage and provocation.

There were two tracks in the cover-up: direct White House interference with the investigating agencies, and cash payoffs to the Watergate burglars to insure their silence. At Nixon’s orders, Haldeman and Ehrlichman met with CIA officials and urged them to tell the FBI that its investigation of the break-in had to be curtailed because it was impinging on ongoing CIA operations. The June 23, 1972 meeting in which Nixon first discussed using the CIA to block the FBI probe became known as the “smoking gun” conversation, and release of the tape-recording of this meeting led directly to Nixon’s resignation on August 8, 1974.

White House Counsel John Dean handled relations with the Watergate burglars. He sat in on all the police interrogations and supervised their defense strategy to insure that their trials would be postponed until after the election. At a key meeting on September 15, 1972, he reviewed his portion of the cover-up with Nixon, including both obstruction of the police investigation and efforts to derail several congressional probes.

Supported by cash payments from the White House which covered both their legal costs and living expenses, five of the Watergate burglars pled guilty while refusing to testify about any other instances of political espionage or any higher-level involvement in the break-in. The two others, McCord and Liddy, were convicted after a brief trial. The effort to

limit the scope of the case collapsed, however, when Judge John Sirica imposed lengthy sentences on all seven men in order to force them to begin cooperating with prosecutors. McCord quickly broke his silence, followed eventually by all except Liddy.

The cover-up unravels

The scandal thereafter developed with an inexorable momentum. Responsibility for the break-in at the DNC was traced upward to the vice-chairman of the Committee to Reelect the President, Jeb Magruder, and then to the committee’s head, John Mitchell, the former attorney general, and to John Dean. After his famous meeting with Nixon on March 21, 1973, when he warned that the Watergate affair had become “a cancer on the presidency,” Dean broke with the White House and sought a deal with prosecutors in return for his testimony against Haldeman, Ehrlichman and ultimately Nixon himself.

Haldeman, Ehrlichman and Attorney General Richard Kleindeinst were forced to resign, public hearings began before a special Senate committee chaired by Democrat Sam Ervin of North Carolina, and the Nixon administration was compelled to appoint Harvard law professor Archibald Cox as Watergate special prosecutor. The television networks provided extensive live coverage of the Senate hearings, bringing to a mass audience the devastating public testimony of Dean, Magruder and an array of lesser figures.

Then came the revelation, on July 15, 1973, that the White House had a taping system that recorded all Oval Office meetings and telephone calls involving the president. Thereafter the Watergate affair revolved around the struggle over whether the White House would release the tapes to Congress and the special prosecutor.

In October 1973 Nixon fired Cox, as well as Attorney General Elliot Richardson and his deputy William French Smith, after Cox refused to drop legal action to compel the White House to release the tapes (the “Saturday Night Massacre”). The public revulsion against this assertion of unrestrained and unaccountable executive authority led to the beginning of impeachment hearings by the House Judiciary Committee. Nixon had to appoint a new special prosecutor, Leon Jaworski, who resumed the legal action to force release of the tapes.

Nixon’s position was further undermined that same month, when Vice President Spiro Agnew was forced to resign on charges of official corruption during his days as Baltimore County executive and governor of Maryland. The installation of Gerald Ford, the House Republican leader, as vice president provided a more plausible and politically safe replacement for Nixon, and cleared the decks for the final push to remove the president from office.

In July 1974 the Supreme Court rejected Nixon’s claim of “executive privilege,” in which he asserted that the constitutionally sanctioned separation of powers between the executive, legislative and judicial branches entitled him to withhold the White House tapes from the courts, Congress and the special prosecutor. The key tapes were turned over. The transcripts of a half-dozen meetings demonstrated Nixon’s central role in the cover-up from the beginning, and his last political support evaporated. At the same time the House Judiciary Committee approved three articles of impeachment, charging Nixon with obstruction of justice, failure to uphold the law and refusing to turn over subpoenaed documents. Nixon resigned from office August 8, 1974, the first president to do so.

The full transcript of the White House Watergate tapes, published late last year (*Abuse of Power: The New Nixon Tapes*, edited by Stanley Kutler, The Free Press), documents that Nixon was considering resignation from April 1973 on, but this step was never a foregone

conclusion. According to one press report, Defense Secretary James Schlesinger, former head of the CIA, kept a close watch on the military brass during Nixon's final days to prevent any attempt to "block the constitutional process." In other words, he was concerned that Nixon or his backers in the Pentagon might attempt a military coup.

Nixon's removal from office put an end to the Watergate investigation and his pardon by Ford a month later insured that there would no further airing of the dangers to democratic rights implicit in the activities of the White House "plumbers." Even today there are powerful forces opposed to a full airing of the crimes of that period. Kutler had to wage a lengthy court battle to obtain release of the portion of Nixon White House tapes referring to Watergate, and these were carefully vetted by the National Archives. Twenty-five years after the events to which they refer, there are still more than a dozen excisions from the tapes for reasons of "national security."



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