

Stage 1: The Watergate Break-In

In the early morning hours of Saturday, June 17, 1972, Frank Wills discovered a piece of tape over a basement-door lock in the Watergate apartment and office complex in Washington, D.C. Wills, a night watchman at the complex, removed the tape and left to get a cup of coffee. When he returned less than an hour later, he found the same lock had been retaped, so he called police.

Plainclothes officers responded to the call, and they soon confronted five burglars in the offices of the Democratic National Committee on the sixth floor of the building. The burglars wore business suits and thin rubber gloves, and they carried cameras, film, a walkie-talkie, lock, picks, electronic surveillance equipment, and stacks of hundred-dollar bills. Although they offered false identifications at first, it was soon discovered that they worked for the Committee to Re-Elect the President, popularly known as CREEP. They were in the Watergate complex to install electronic bugging equipment in telephones that would have transmitted Democratic campaign strategy back to CREEP.

Most newspapers downplayed or ignored the initial story of the break-in, but the Washington Post ran a story on the front page of its Sunday edition. The Post's story was written by Bob Woodward, who with his colleague Carl Bernstein, soon began an in-depth investigation of the curious circumstances surrounding the Watergate burglary.

In response to the story, John Mitchell, President Nixon's campaign manager, denied that the burglary was part of a spying operation by the president's men. Ronald Ziegler, the president's press secretary, said, "I am not going to comment on a third-rate alleged burglary attempt." And, within days of the break-in, President Nixon himself denied the White House had been involved.

Stage 2: Investigations Begin

In the early days following the Watergate break-in, hardly anyone in the country suspected that there was a direct link between the burglary and the White House. But details of the brewing scandal began to emerge in the pages of the Washington Post, shortly before and for a long time after, the 1972 election.

Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein were two young reporters at the Post who pursued the story. In the process, they logged thousands of investigative hours and followed hundreds of leads, including anonymous sources. The two reporters began to slowly link Nixon's advisers, and eventually Nixon himself, to a cover-up of the White House's involvement in the burglary.

Soon, other groups also began to pursue more information about Watergate. A number of newspapers and magazines aggressively covered the story, and a grand jury convened to investigate the ramifications of the break-in. After the initial grand jury investigations in September 1972, only two White House aides, Gordon Liddy, E. Howard Hunt, and the five burglars – James McCord, CREEP's director of security; and four Cubans who had been recruited for the job – were indicted (charged with a crime). Both Liddy and Hunt had initially avoided arrest, but later pleaded guilty to involvement in the burglary.

The many investigations into the Watergate scandal ultimately revealed that it was about more than just a burglary. Woodward and Bernstein and others obtained evidence that White House officials were responsible for a series of efforts to ensure Nixon was reelected. They planned to discredit and sabotage several Democratic presidential contenders, and pledged to do "whatever was necessary" to stop government leaks to the press. They also extorted (illegally used their official position to obtain) millions of dollars in campaign contributions from corporations seeking government favors, and even tried to get the Internal Revenue Service to (in Nixon's words) "pressure our enemies." As news stories increasingly connected top presidential officials with such sordid activities, the White House issued stronger denials and put pressure on the Washington Post and others to back off.

Stage 3: Congressional Hearings

In March 1973, the grand jury investigating the burglary convicted Liddy, Hunt, and the five burglars and sentenced them to 20, 35, and 40 years in prison, respectively. Soon thereafter, L. Patrick Gray, the acting director of the FBI, resigned after admitting he had destroyed Watergate evidence. In May 1973, North Carolina senator Sam Ervin, chair of the Senate Select Committee on Presidential Activities, convened hearings on Watergate. The hearings were televised across the nation and were watched with great fascination by large numbers of Americans.

Former White House counsel John Dean, fired in April by Nixon, testified before the committee in June. He revealed that former Attorney General John Mitchell – who became Nixon’s 1972 presidential campaign manager – had ordered the Watergate break-in and that the White House was covering up its involvement. Dean also testified that the president had authorized payments of hush money to the burglars to keep them quiet, a charge vehemently denied by Nixon’s aides. On July 16, 1973, the startling testimony of White House aide Alexander Butterfield testified that Nixon had ordered a taping system installed in the White House to automatically record all conversations – something only a handful of people had known about. Now, the hearing’s key questions – what did the president know, and when did he know it – could be answered by listening to the tapes.

Special prosecutor Archibald Cox, who had been appointed to investigate the Watergate break-in, immediately subpoenaed (summoned to court) eight tapes from the White House to confirm Dean’s testimony. Nixon refused to give them up, claiming they were vital to national security. Nixon then offered to provide a summary of the tapes to Cox. Cox said that wasn’t good enough, and so Nixon had him fired in October 1973. Cox’s dismissal prompted an outpouring of protest, which included 350,000 angry telegrams sent to Congress and the White House. Nixon responded to the unexpected protests by appointing another special prosecutor, Leon Jaworski, and then turning over the subpoenaed tapes. By this time, many of Nixon’s top aides had been indicted for crimes related to Watergate.

Stage 4: The Secret Tapes

When President Nixon finally turned over the secret tapes to Judge Sirica, some of the conversations requested by the special prosecutor were missing. One tape had a mysterious gap of 18 ½ minutes, which experts said resulted from five separate erasures. Nixon's aides denied that any intentional erasures had occurred and blamed the 18 ½ -minute gap on an accidental erasure by Nixon's secretary, Rose Mary Woods.

Woods told Judge Sirica she had accidentally erased the tape while she was transcribing it, but her description was rather implausible and accounted for only 5 minutes of erasure, leaving 13 ½ minutes of missing tape unaccounted for. Americans increasingly believed the missing conversations were part of a larger White House effort to hide damning evidence.

Seven top White House officials – including Mitchell and Colson – were indicted in March 1974 by a grand jury for their role in the Watergate cover-up. Though Nixon was not indicted with his top aides, special prosecutor Leon Jaworski gave Sirica a secret report and bulging briefcase of evidence against the president and asked him to send it to the House Judiciary Committee, which was considering impeachment charges against the president.

Then, Jaworski requested 42 more tapes from Nixon. Instead of releasing the tapes themselves, at the end of April Nixon released transcripts of the tapes prepared by White House aides, who had edited out all irrelevant material. Their release caused a sensation: the Government Printing Office sold 800 copies in three hours on May 1, 1974, and paperback books rushed into print sold millions of copies. The transcripts were somewhat sanitized for public consumption; wherever vulgarities existed on the tape, the aides wrote, "expletive deleted" on the transcripts.

The transcripts revealed an overwhelming desire among Nixon and his aides to punish political opponents, and to thwart the Watergate investigation. Now, even Nixon's most steadfast supporters began to suggest that he needed to step down. Two months later, Jaworski requested 64 more tapes as evidence in the cases against the indicted White House officials. Nixon refused to comply, but the Supreme Court voted 8-0 in July 1974 that he had to turn over the tapes.

Stage 5: Nixon Resigns

After the Supreme Court ruled in late July 1974 that Nixon must turn over the remaining tapes, the House Judiciary Committee adopted three articles of impeachment against the president. The charged him with misusing presidential power to violate the constitutional rights of U.S. citizens, obstruction of justice, and defying Judiciary Committee subpoenas.

In early August 1974, Nixon provided transcripts of the eight subpoenaed tapes. The tapes contained the “smoking gun” – the irrefutable evidence that Nixon had knowingly violated the law and that he had known about and had participated in the cover-up of the Watergate break-in from almost the very beginning – something he had steadfastly denied.

Until the tapes were forced out, the idea of such dealings and conversations in the White House seemed beyond belief. The tapes also revealed that the president and his advisors were petty and mean, constantly using vulgar and offensive expletives in their conversations. Republican Senate leaders called the tapes, “a shabby, disgusting, immoral performance.”

The backlash to the last set of tapes was overwhelming. Congressional Republicans – members of Nixon’s own party-concluded that Nixon was guilty and was a liability they could no longer afford. They told the president that his impeachment by the House of Representatives and his removal from office by the Senate were both foregone conclusions, and that he should resign.

Rather than face the near certainty of being forced from office, Nixon resigned on August 9, 1974. In his farewell address, he admitted making some “judgments” that “were wrong,” but he insisted that he had always acted “in what I believed at the time to be the best interests of the nation.” Then he climbed the stairs of the presidential helicopter, turned and gave one last victory salute to his staff, and flew off to political exile in California.