



Investigating the Watergate Scandal

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Source: *OAH Magazine of History*, Vol. 12, No. 4, Congressional History (Summer, 1998), pp. 49-53

Published by: Oxford University Press on behalf of Organization of American Historians

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25163236>

Accessed: 04-10-2016 00:20 UTC

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Investigating the Watergate Scandal

At first, few people took the Watergate burglary seriously, and it had no impact on the presidential election of 1972. Yet by 1974 the scandal caused President Richard Nixon to resign his office rather than face impeachment. Twenty-one individuals associated with the Nixon administration and the Committee to Reelect the President eventually went to jail for Watergate-related crimes, including John Dean and H. R. Haldeman. The press, the special prosecutor, and the courts all played significant roles in uncovering the evidence of illegal activities that caused the president to resign, but it was a special committee of the United States Senate that focused attention most sharply on the people and events surrounding Watergate and helped the public understand what happened.

Eventually, the Watergate committee's questioning uncovered the existence of a secret taping system inside the White House that had recorded most of the president's conversations. This news changed much of the focus of the investigation. The committee issued subpoenas for the tapes, but President Nixon would only release highly selected portions. When the Supreme Court ordered the president to turn over subpoenaed tapes to the special prosecutor investigating Watergate, support for the president in Congress collapsed. Nixon resigned as president on 9 August 1974. Watergate provides a dramatic example of how Congress uses its power of investigation, and it serves as a model against which other investigations, past and present, can be judged.

In addition to the readings provided with this lesson, students might read newspaper and magazine accounts of Watergate on microfiche, look at the memoirs of the Watergate participants, and view some of the documentary films available, such as the *Watergate* series that appeared on the Discovery Channel. In class, students can be

assigned to take the positions of the senators, the president, and the major witnesses, to make their cases and to explain their contributions to the unraveling of the nation's greatest political scandal.

Objectives

1. To interpret primary documents.
2. To understand how a congressional investigation works.
3. To identify the major figures and issues involved in the Watergate investigation.
4. To consider the arguments that the different sides and participants made.
5. To develop a measure for judging other congressional investigations.

Student Assignments

1. Based on their readings of primary documents (included here), have the students write a newspaper editorial assessing the Watergate hearings and the charges against the president.
2. Have students look at newspaper and magazine accounts of Watergate on microfiche, read a memoir by a Watergate participant, or view the videotapes of the *Watergate* series that appeared on the Discovery Channel. From these supplementary materials have them report on the role of any one individual involved in Watergate. □

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Documents

On 17 June 1972, police arrested five men who had broken into the Democratic National Committee headquarters at the Watergate office building in Washington, D.C. carrying wiretapping equipment. Although evidence linked the men to the Committee to Re-elect the President, President Richard Nixon denied any involvement in this “third-rate burglary.” Voters similarly discounted the incident. In November President Nixon won reelection with 61 percent of the vote, carrying forty-nine states.

Yet the Watergate story persisted. *Washington Post* reporters Bob

Woodward and Carl Bernstein published numerous articles that tied the burglars closely with the president’s top staff. Other newspaper and television reporting indicated that the White House had paid “hush money” to keep the burglars from talking and that Nixon’s administration had engaged in a cover-up of its illegal activities.

In January 1973 the United States Senate established a Select Committee on Presidential Campaign Activities. Chairing the committee was the colorful seventy-five-year-old North Carolina Democrat Sam Ervin. Senator Ervin portrayed himself as “just a country lawyer,” but he proved a shrewd and tough questioner of witnesses. The ranking Republican was the forty-seven-year-old Tennessee Senator Howard Baker, who repeatedly asked witnesses: “What did the President know, and when did he know it?” A national television audience watched as the committee heard former White House Counsel John Dean describe White House intrigue that led to the burglary and cover-up. They also heard the president’s former chief of staff, H. R. Haldeman, deny any wrongdoing.

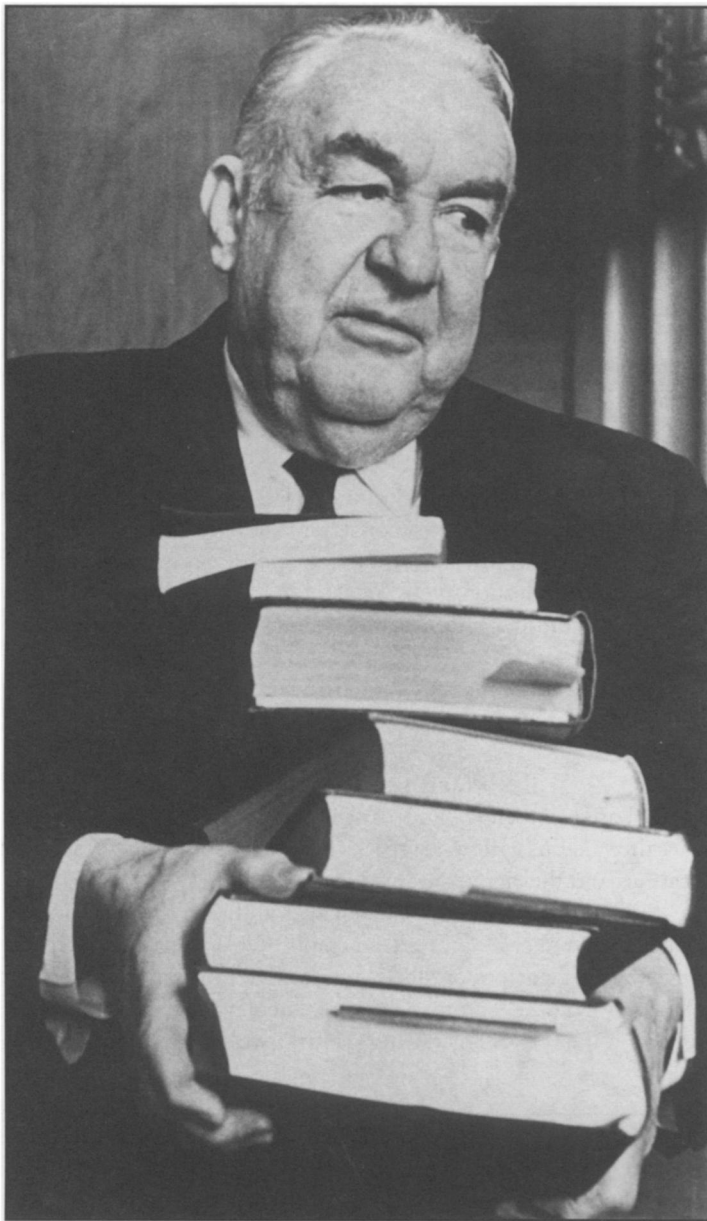
Congressional investigations seek to gather information, to identify and correct wrongdoing, and to influence public thinking. In their opening statements, members of the committee explain what they hope to accomplish and set the tone for the hearings that will follow. They and their staff counsel then call witnesses, who usually make their own formal statements before undergoing cross-examination. Witnesses try to make their case, seeking to defend themselves and their actions in order to convince both the committee and national public opinion.

Below are excerpts from the opening statements of Senator Ervin and Senator Baker, along with representative excerpts from the testimony of John Dean and H. R. Haldeman. In addition, although President Nixon never personally appeared before the Watergate committee, he issued statements and made several speeches answering the charges made against him. What do they tell us about the Watergate scandal and the political climate in Washington during the presidency of Richard Nixon?

From Senator Sam Ervin’s opening statement, 17 May 1973:

“If the allegations that have been made in the wake of the Watergate affair are substantiated, there has been a very serious subversion of the integrity of the electoral process, and the committee will be obliged to consider the manner in which such a subversion affects the continued existence of this Nation as a representative democracy, and how, if we are to survive, such subversions may be prevented in the future.

“It has been asserted that the 1972 campaign was influenced by a wide variety of illegal and unethical activities, including the widespread tapping of telephones, political headquarters, and even the residences of candidates and their campaign staffs and of members of the press; by the publication of forged documents designed to



Watergate Committee Chair Sam Ervin. (Courtesy of the U.S. Senate Historical Office.)

defame certain candidates or enhance others through fraudulent means; the infiltration and disruption of opponents' political organizations and gatherings; the raising and handling of campaign contributions through means designed to circumvent, either in letter or in spirit, the provisions of the campaign disclosure acts; and even the acceptance of campaign contributions based upon promises of illegal interference in governmental processes on behalf of the contributors.

"Finally, and perhaps most disturbingly, it has been alleged that, following the Watergate break-in, there has been a massive attempt to cover up all the improper activities, extending even so far as to pay off potential witnesses and, in particular, the seven defendants in the Watergate trial in exchange for their promise to remain silent—activities which, if true, represent interference in the integrity of the prosecutorial and judicial processes of this Nation. Moreover, there has been evidence of the use of governmental instrumentalities in efforts to exercise political surveillance over candidates in the 1972 campaign."

From Senator Howard Baker's opening statement, 17 May 1973:

"I would like to close, Mr. Chairman, with a few thoughts on the political process in this country. There has been a great deal of discussion across the country in recent weeks about the impact that Watergate might have on the President, the office of the Presidency, the Congress, on our ability to carry on relations with other countries, and so on. The constitutional institutions of this Republic are so strong and so resilient that I have never doubted for a moment their ability to function without interruption. On the contrary, it seems clear to me the very fact that we are now involved in the public process of cleaning our house, before the eyes of the world, is a mark of the greatest strength. I do not believe that any other political system could endure the thoroughness and the ferocity of the various inquiries now underway within the branches of Government and in our courageous, tenacious free press.

"No mention is made in our Constitution of political parties. But the two-party system, in my judgment, is as integral and important to our form of government as the three formal branches of the central government themselves. Millions of Americans participated actively, on one level or another, and with great enthusiasm, in the Presidential election of 1972. This involvement in the political process by citizens across the land is essential to participatory democracy. If one of the effects of Watergate is public disillusionment with partisan politics, if people are turned off and drop out of the political system, this will be the greatest Watergate casualty of all. If, on the other hand, this national catharsis in which we are now engaged should result in a new and better way of doing political business, if Watergate produces changes in laws and campaign procedures, then Watergate may prove to be a great national opportunity to revitalize the political process and to involve even more Americans in the day-to-day work of our two

political parties. I am deeply encouraged by the fact that I find no evidence at this point in time to indicate that either the Democratic National Committee or the Republican National Committee played any role in whatever may have gone wrong in 1972. The hundreds of seasoned political professionals across the country, and the millions of people who devoted their time and energies to the campaigns, should not feel implicated or let down by what has taken place."

Richard Nixon's defense, 22 May 1973:

"Recent news accounts growing out of testimony in the Watergate investigation have given grossly misleading impressions of many of the facts, as they relate both to my own role and to certain unrelated activities involving national security.

"Already, on the basis of second- and third-hand testimony by persons either convicted or themselves under investigation in the case, I have found myself accused of involvement in activities I never heard of until I read about them in news accounts.

"These impressions could also lead to a serious misunderstanding of those national security activities which, though totally unrelated to Watergate, have become entangled in the case. They could lead to further compromise of sensitive national security information.

"I will not abandon my responsibilities. I will continue to do the job I was elected to do. In the accompanying statements, I have set forth the facts as I know them as they relate to my own role.

"With regard to the specific allegations that have been made, I can and do state categorically:

- 1) I had no prior knowledge of the Watergate operation.
- 2) I took no part in, nor was I aware of, any subsequent efforts that may have been made to cover up Watergate.
- 3) At no time did I authorize any offer of Executive clemency for the Watergate defendants, nor did I know of any such offer.
- 4) I did not know, until the time of my own investigation, of any effort to provide the Watergate defendants with funds.
- 5) At no time did I attempt, or did I authorize others to attempt, to implicate the CIA in the Watergate matter.
- 6) It was not until the time of my own investigation that I learned of the break-in at the office of Mr. Ellsberg's psychiatrist, and I specifically authorized the furnishing of this information to Judge Byrne.
- 7) I neither authorized nor encouraged subordinates to engage in illegal or improper campaign tactics."

From John Dean's testimony, 25 June 1973:

"It is a very difficult thing for me to testify about other people. It is far more easy for me to explain my own involvement in this matter,

the fact that I was involved in obstructing justice, the fact that I assisted another in perjured testimony, the fact that I made personal use of funds that were in my custody, it is far easier to talk about these things myself than to talk about what others did. Some of these people I will be referring to are friends, some are men I greatly admire and respect, and particularly with reference to the President of the United States, I would like to say this. It is my honest belief that while the President was involved that he did not realize or appreciate at any time the implications of his involvement, and I think that when the facts come out I hope the President will be forgiven.

"To one who was in the White House and became somewhat familiar with its interworkings, the Watergate matter was an inevitable outgrowth of a climate of excessive concern over the political impact of demonstrators, excessive concern over leaks, an insatiable appetite for political intelligence, all coupled with a do-it-yourself White House staff, regardless of the law. However, the fact that many of the elements of this climate culminated with the creation of a covert intelligence operation as a part of the President's reelection committee was not by conscious design, rather an accident of fate."



White House Counsel John Dean testifies. (Courtesy of the U.S. Senate Historical Office.)

From H. R. Haldeman's testimony, 30 July 1973:

"I have full confidence that when the entire truth is known, it will be clear to the American people that President Nixon had no knowledge of or involvement in either the Watergate affair itself or the subsequent efforts of a coverup of the Watergate. It will be equally clear, despite all the unfounded allegations to the contrary, that I had no such knowledge or involvement....

"I cannot imagine anything more satisfying than to have had the opportunity to play a part in the first Nixon administration—which brought about the end of America's longest and most difficult war; the end of the cold war which had been a fact of life for as long as many of us can remember; the opening of communications and dialogue with the leaders of the Soviet Union and the leaders of the People's Republic of China; the building of a structure that can well lead not to just one but many generations of peace; the start of the return of the power of Government to the people by revenue sharing and Federal reorganization; the whole

new approach to domestic programs designed to bring those programs into line with the real needs and desires of the people. We all felt and still feel that the first 4 years was a time of laying the groundwork for even greater accomplishments in the second term and we have complete faith that that promise will be met.

"One of the great tragedies of our time is that, for the moment at least, a cloud hangs over the accomplishments of the past 4 years and the promise of the next 4 years because of Watergate, its aftermath, and related matters. This has spawned an unceasing barrage of charges and countercharges, allegations, innuendo, hearsay, rumor, speculation, hypothesis,

which I devoutly hope these hearings and the concurrent work of the Justice Department and the special prosecutor will bring to an early and definite conclusion so that the Nation and its leadership can again turn their thoughts and their efforts to more productive enterprises.

"During this period, with its intense concentration on every aspect of the Watergate and everything related to it, the sense of proportion regarding the time period under study becomes grossly distorted. In looking at the year 1972, it is important—especially now during these hearings—to try to keep a sense of perspective as to where things fit. The harmless eye of a fly viewed under a microscope can become a terrifying object in spite of its actual insignificance. Likewise, the Watergate viewed under the microscope of this hearing and the intensive coverage of all of its aspects can become a terrifying sight if one loses track of the perspective in which it should be viewed. This is in no way an attempt to minimize the importance of the problems posed by the Watergate or the necessity to get to the truth and to take the necessary actions to deal with the facts and prevent a recurrence."

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Interpreting Primary Sources

1. According to Senator Sam Ervin, what abuses took place during the 1972 campaign?
2. In what ways did Senator Ervin see a "cover-up" occurring?
3. What aspect of Watergate most worried Senator Howard Baker?
4. In what ways did Senator Baker feel encouraged, despite the scandal?
5. How did President Nixon react to the charges made against him?
6. What did he pledge to do?
7. Why did John Dean feel it was difficult for him to testify?
8. What explanation did Dean give for Watergate?
9. How did H. R. Haldeman seek to defend President Nixon?
10. How serious did Haldeman believe the scandal was?