

Watergate

US political scandal, named for the building in Washington, DC that housed the Democrats' campaign headquarters in the 1972 presidential election. Nixon, faced with a divided opposition led by the liberal George McGovern, had gained reelection by an overwhelming margin Nov 1972, but during the campaign, Nixon's staff had broken into the Democratic Party's Watergate headquarters

Five men, hired by the Republican Committee to Reelect the President (CREEP), were caught after breaking into the Watergate with complex electronic surveillance equipment. Investigations revealed that the White House was implicated in the break-in, and that there was a "slush fund", used to finance unethical activities, including using the CIA and the Internal Revenue Service for political ends, setting up paramilitary operations against opponents, altering and destroying evidence, and bribing defendants to lie or remain silent. In Aug 1974, President Nixon was forced by the Supreme Court to surrender to Congress tape recordings of conversations he had held with administration officials, which indicated his complicity in a cover-up. When this and the attempts at cover-up came to light, the scandal forced the resignation of the president Aug 1974, just short of impeachment. Nixon resigned rather than face impeachment for obstruction of justice and other crimes.

US v Nixon

A US Supreme Court decision 1974 dealing with the extent to which a US president may exercise executive privilege in a criminal investigation. During the Watergate investigations, President Nixon cited this privilege in refusing to produce certain tape recordings that had been subpoenaed by Special Prosecutor Jaworski. The Court ruled unanimously that while the president had certain privileges, they were subject to definition by the judiciary, the final interpreters of the Constitution. According to the Court, given the circumstances of the criminal investigation, Jaworski had the power to overrule presidential autonomy, requiring Nixon to yield the tapes.

Watergate shook the US public's confidence in the Washington establishment. Gerald Ford, who had been appointed vice president when Spiro Agnew was forced to step down Dec 1973, pardoned Nixon and kept the services of Kissinger and the policy of détente when he became president. He faced a hostile, Democrat-dominated Congress that introduced legislation curbing the unauthorized power of the presidency, attempting to mend fences both at home and abroad. He also had to deal with the economic recession and increased OPEC oil prices that began under Nixon 1973.

Nixon, Richard (Milhous) (1913-1994)

37th president of the US 1969–74, a Republican. He attracted attention as a member of the Un-American Activities Committee 1948, and was vice president to Eisenhower 1953–61. As president he was responsible for US withdrawal from Vietnam, and forged new links with China, but at home his culpability in the coverup of the Watergate scandal and the existence of a “slush fund” for political machinations during his reelection campaign 1972 led to his resignation 1974 when threatened with impeachment.

Background : Born at Yorba Linda, California of a Quaker family, he grew up in Whittier, California and practiced law there 1937–42, then served in the navy 1942–46.

Political career : Nixon entered Congress in 1947, and in 1948, as a member of the Un-American Activities Committee, pressed for the investigation of Alger Hiss, accused of being a spy. Nixon was senator from California from 1951 until elected vice president. He played a more extensive role in government than previous vice-presidents, in part because of the poor health of President Eisenhower. He lost the presidential election 1960 to John F Kennedy, partly because televised electoral debates put him at a disadvantage.

Presidency : He did not seek presidential nomination in 1964, but in a “law and order” campaign defeated Vice-president Humphrey 1968 in one of the most closely contested elections in US history. Facing a Democratic Congress, Nixon sought to extricate the US from the war in Vietnam. He formulated the Nixon Doctrine 1969, abandoning close involvement with Asian countries, but escalated the war in Cambodia by massive bombing.

Vietnam War : Abroad, President Johnson escalated US involvement in the Vietnam War 1964–75, which polarized public opinion and deeply divided the Democratic Party into “hawks and doves”. Johnson declined to run for reelection Nov 1968, and his vice president, Hubert Humphrey, was defeated by Republican Richard Nixon. Working with National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger, Nixon escalated the Vietnam conflict by invading neighboring Cambodia before he began a gradual disengagement, launching a policy of détente that brought an improvement in relations with the Soviet Union (Strategic Arms Limitation Talks) and a visit to Communist China 1973.

Resignation: Nixon was reelected 1972 in a landslide victory over George McGovern, and immediately faced allegations of irregularities and illegalities conducted on his behalf in his reelection campaign and within the White House. Despite his success in extricating the US from Vietnam, Congressional and judicial investigations, along with press exposures of the Watergate affair, undermined public support. He resigned 1974, the first US president to do so, under threat of impeachment on three counts: obstruction of the administration of justice in the investigation of Watergate; violation of constitutional rights of citizens, for example attempting to use the Internal Revenue Service, Federal Bureau of Investigation, and Central Intelligence Agency as weapons against political opponents; and failure to produce “papers and things” as ordered by the Judiciary Committee.

He was granted a pardon 1974 by President Ford and turned to lecturing and writing.

Agnew, Spiro Theodore (1918-)

US vice president 1969–73. A Republican, he was governor of Maryland 1966–69, and vice president under Nixon. He took the lead in a campaign against the press and opponents of the Vietnam War. Although he was one of the few administration officials not to be implicated in the Watergate affair, he resigned 1973, shortly before pleading “no contest” to a charge of income-tax evasion.

Burger, Warren Earl (1907-)

US jurist and chief justice of the United States 1969–86. His term in the US Supreme Court was marked by a conservative turn in civil-rights matters. His majority decision in the Watergate tapes case *US v Nixon* 1974 was instrumental in bringing about Nixon’s resignation.

Born in St Paul, Minnesota, Burger was educated at the University of Minnesota and was admitted to the bar 1931. President Eisenhower appointed him judge of the US Court of Appeals 1956. In 1969 Burger was named to the US Supreme Court, succeeding Chief Justice Earl Warren. Burger retired from the Court 1986 and was succeeded by William Rehnquist.

Haig, Alexander (Meigs) (1924-)

US general and Republican politician. He became President Nixon's White House chief of staff at the height of the Watergate scandal, was NATO commander 1974–79, and secretary of state to President Reagan 1981–82.

Haldeman, H R (Harry Robbins) (1926-1993)

US businessman and presidential aide. He was chief of staff to Richard Nixon 1969–1974. Immensely protective and loyal toward his president, Haldeman was crucially involved in the Watergate cover-up and, after being convicted of obstructing justice and lying, served 18 months in a federal prison.

Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)

On the domestic front, it was illegally involved in the Watergate political scandal and in the 1970s lost public confidence when US influence collapsed in Iran, Afghanistan, Nicaragua, Yemen, and elsewhere.

The CIA belongs to the executive branch of government and acts on the president's orders. Historically, it runs both covert (secret) and overt (open) operations in the name of national security.

Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI)

The FBI reports to the US Attorney General, and investigates espionage, sabotage, kidnapping, bank robbery, civil-rights violations, and fraud against the government, and conducts security clearances. Field divisions are maintained in more than 60 US cities. The FBI's special agents are qualified in law, accounting, or auditing.

In 1973 L Patrick Gray, the acting director, resigned when it was revealed that he had destroyed relevant material in the Watergate investigation.