

# [Watergate, scandal that began with the burglary](https://assignbuster.com/watergate-scandal-that-began-with-the-burglary/)

Watergate, designation of a major U. S. political scandal that began withthe burglary and wiretapping of the Democratic party’s campaign headquarters, later engulfed President Richard M. Nixon and many of his supporters in avariety of illegal acts, and culminated in the first resignation of a U. S. president. The burglary was committed on June 17, 1972, by five men who werecaught in the offices of the Democratic National Committee at the Watergateapartment and office complex in Washington, D.

C. Their arrest eventuallyuncovered a White House-sponsored plan of espionage against political opponentsand a trail of complicity that led to many of the highest officials in the land, including former U. S. Attorney General John Mitchell, White House Counsel JohnDean, White House Chief of Staff H. R. Haldeman, White House Special Assistanton Domestic Affairs John Ehrlichman, and President Nixon himself. On April 30, 1973, nearly a year after the burglary and arrest and following a grand juryinvestigation of the burglary, Nixon accepted the resignation of Haldeman andEhrlichman and announced the dismissal of Dean.

U. S. Attorney General RichardKleindienst resigned as well. The new attorney general, Elliot Richardson, appointed a special prosecutor, Harvard Law School professor Archibald Cox, toconduct a full-scale investigation of the Watergate break-in. In May 1973 theSenate Select Committee on Presidential Activities opened hearings, with SenatorSam Ervin of North Carolina as chairman. A series of startling revelationsfollowed. Dean testified that Mitchell had ordered the break-in and that a majorattempt was under way to hide White House involvement.

He claimed that thepresident had authorized payments to the burglars to keep them quiet. The Nixonadministration vehemently denied this assertion. The White House Tapes Thetestimony of White House aide Alexander Butterfield unlocked the entireinvestigation. On July 16, 1973, Butterfield told the committee, on nationwidetelevision, that Nixon had ordered a taping system installed in the White Houseto automatically record all conversations; what the president said and when hesaid it could be verified. Cox immediately subpoenaed eight relevant tapes toconfirm Dean’s testimony. Nixon refused to release the tapes, claiming they werevital to the national security. U. S.

District Court Judge John Sirica ruled thatNixon must give the tapes to Cox, and an appeals court upheld the decision. Nixon held firm. He refused to turn over the tapes and, on Saturday, October 20, 1973, ordered Richardson to dismiss Cox. Richardson refused and resignedinstead, as did Deputy Attorney General William Ruckelshaus. Finally, thesolicitor general discharged Cox. A storm of public protest resulted from this” Saturday night massacre.

” In response, Nixon appointed another specialprosecutor, Leon Jaworski, a Texas lawyer, and gave the tapes to Sirica. Somesubpoenaed conversations were missing, and one tape had a mysterious gap of 181minutes. Experts determined that the gap was the result of five separateerasures.

In March 1974 a grand jury indicted Mitchell, Haldeman, Ehrlichman, and four other White House officials for their part in the Watergate cover-upand named Nixon as an “ unindicted co-conspirator.” The following monthJaworski requested and Nixon released written transcripts of 42 more tapes. Theconversations revealed an overwhelming concern with punishing politicalopponents and thwarting the Watergate investigation. In May 1974 Jaworskirequested 64 more tapes as evidence in the criminal cases against the indictedofficials. Nixon refused; on July 24, the Supreme Court voted 8-0 that Nixonmust turn over the tapes. On July 29-30, 1974, the House Judiciary Committeeapproved three articles of impeachment, charging Nixon with misusing his powerin order to violate the constitutional rights of U.

S. citizens, obstructingjustice in the Watergate affair, and defying Judiciary Committee subpoenas. Further Revelations Soon after the Watergate scandal came to light, investigators uncovered a related group of illegal activities: Since 1971 aWhite House group called the “ plumbers” had been doing whatever wasnecessary to stop leaks to the press. A grand jury indicted Ehrlichman, WhiteHouse Special Counsel Charles Colson, and others for organizing a break-in andburglary in 1971 of a psychiatrist’s office to obtain damaging material againstDaniel Ellsberg, who had publicized classified documents called the PentagonPapers. Investigators also discovered that the Nixon administration hadsolicited large sums of money in illegal campaign contributionsused tofinance political espionage and to pay more than $500, 000 to the Watergateburglarsand that certain administration officials had systematically liedabout their involvement in the break-in and cover-up. In addition, White Houseaides testified that in 1972 they had falsified documents to make it appear thatPresident John F. Kennedy had been involved in the 1963 assassination ofPresident Ngo Dinh Diem of South Vietnam, and had written false and slanderousdocuments accusing Senator Hubert H.

Humphrey of moral improprieties. Nixon’sResignation Throughout this period of revelations, Nixon’s support in Congressand popularity nationwide steadily eroded. On August 5, 1974, three tapesrevealed that Nixon had, on June 23, 1972, ordered the Federal Bureau ofInvestigation to stop investigating the Watergate break-in. The tapes alsoshowed that Nixon himself had helped to direct the cover-up of theadministration’s involvement in the affair.

Rather than face almost certainimpeachment, Nixon resigned on August 9, the first U. S. president to do so. Amonth later his successor, Gerald Ford, pardoned him for all crimes he mighthave committed while in office; Nixon was then immune from federal prosecution. The Watergate scandal severely shook the faith of the American people in thepresidency and turned out to be a supreme test for the U. S. Constitution.

Throughout the ordeal, however, the constitutional system of checks and balancesworked to prevent abuses, as the Founding Fathers had intended. Watergate showedthat in a nation of laws no one is above the law, not even the president