

Watergate, scandal
that began with the
burglary



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Watergate, designation of a major U. S. political scandal that began with the burglary and wiretapping of the Democratic party's campaign headquarters, later engulfed President Richard M. Nixon and many of his supporters in a variety 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 were caught in the offices of the Democratic National Committee at the Watergate apartment and office complex in Washington, D.

C. Their arrest eventually uncovered a White House-sponsored plan of espionage against political opponents and 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 John Dean, White House Chief of Staff H. R. Haldeman, White House Special Assistant on Domestic Affairs John Ehrlichman, and President Nixon himself. On April 30, 1973, nearly a year after the burglary and arrest and following a grand jury investigation of the burglary, Nixon accepted the resignation of Haldeman and Ehrlichman and announced the dismissal of Dean.

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

He claimed that the president had authorized payments to the burglars to keep them quiet. The Nixon administration vehemently denied this assertion. The White House Tapes The testimony of White House aide Alexander Butterfield unlocked the entire investigation. On July 16, 1973, Butterfield told the committee, on nationwide television, that Nixon had ordered a taping system installed in the White House to automatically record all conversations; what the president said and when he said it could be verified. Cox immediately subpoenaed eight relevant tapes to confirm Dean's testimony. Nixon refused to release the tapes, claiming they were vital to the national security. U. S.

District Court Judge John Sirica ruled that Nixon 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 resigned instead, as did Deputy Attorney General William French Smith. Finally, the solicitor general discharged Cox. A storm of public protest resulted from this "Saturday night massacre."

" In response, Nixon appointed another special prosecutor, Leon Jaworski, a Texas lawyer, and gave the tapes to Sirica. Some subpoenaed conversations were missing, and one tape had a mysterious gap of 181 minutes. Experts determined that the gap was the result of five separate erasures.

In March 1974 a grand jury indicted Mitchell, Haldeman, Ehrlichman, and four other White House officials for their part in the Watergate cover-up and named Nixon as an " unindicted co-conspirator." The following

month Jaworski requested and Nixon released written transcripts of 42 more tapes. The conversations revealed an overwhelming concern with punishing political opponents and thwarting the Watergate investigation. In May 1974 Jaworski requested 64 more tapes as evidence in the criminal cases against the indicted officials. Nixon refused; on July 24, the Supreme Court voted 8-0 that Nixon must turn over the tapes. On July 29-30, 1974, the House Judiciary Committee approved three articles of impeachment, charging Nixon with misusing his power in order to violate the constitutional rights of U.

S. citizens, obstructing justice 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 a White House group called the "plumbers" had been doing whatever was necessary to stop leaks to the press. A grand jury indicted Ehrlichman, White House Special Counsel Charles Colson, and others for organizing a break-in and burglary in 1971 of a psychiatrist's office to obtain damaging material against Daniel Ellsberg, who had publicized classified documents called the Pentagon Papers. Investigators also discovered that the Nixon administration had solicited large sums of money in illegal campaign contributions used to finance political espionage and to pay more than \$500,000 to the Watergate burglars and that certain administration officials had systematically lied about their involvement in the break-in and cover-up. In addition, White House aides testified that in 1972 they had falsified documents to make it appear that President John F. Kennedy had been involved in the 1963 assassination of President Ngo Dinh

Diem of South Vietnam, and had written false and slanderous documents accusing Senator Hubert H.

Humphrey of moral improprieties. Nixon's Resignation Throughout this period of revelations, Nixon's support in Congress and popularity nationwide steadily eroded. On August 5, 1974, three tapes revealed that Nixon had, on June 23, 1972, ordered the Federal Bureau of Investigation to stop investigating the Watergate break-in. The tapes also showed that Nixon himself had helped to direct the cover-up of the administration's involvement in the affair.

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

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